FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

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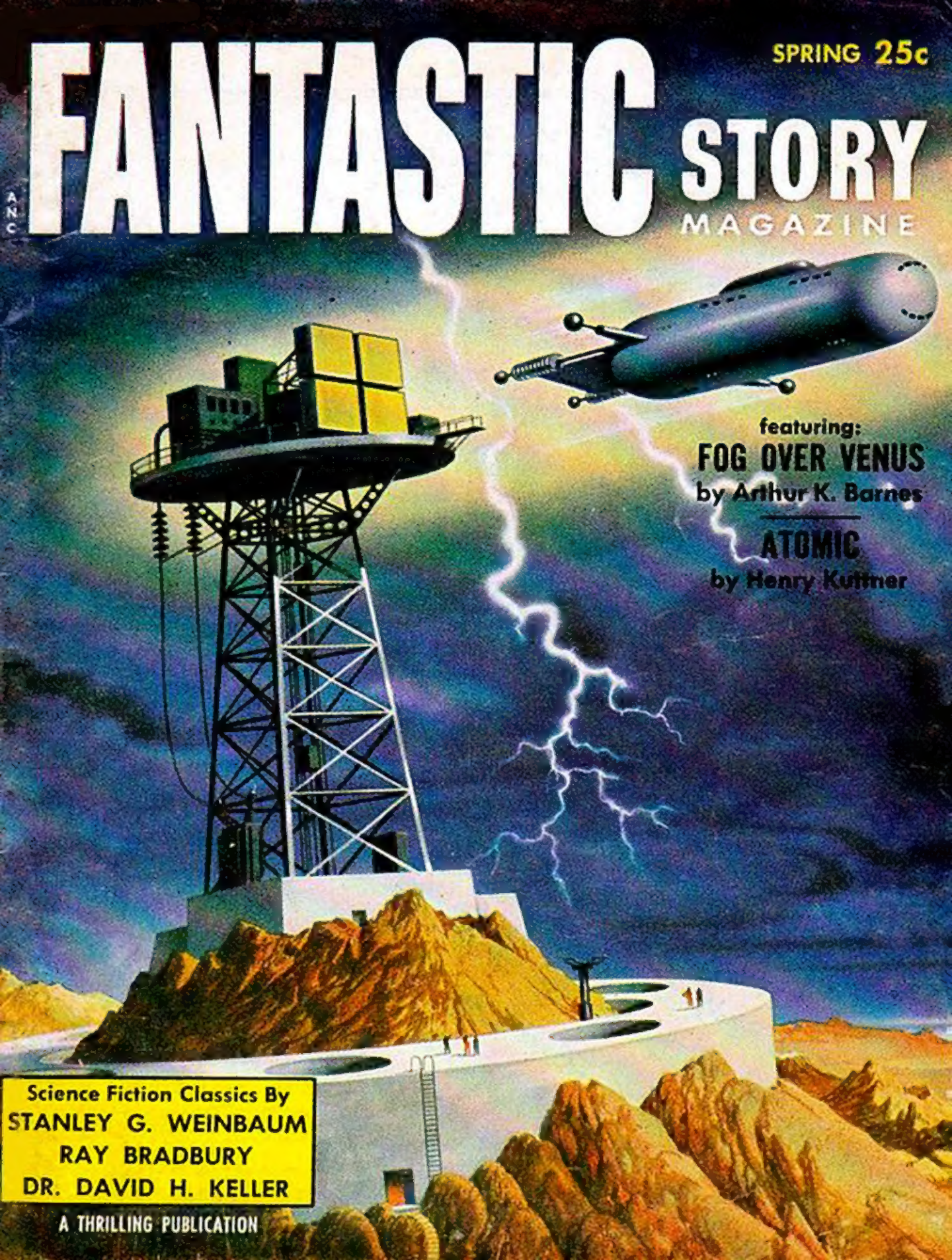

featuring:

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by Arthur K. Barnes

ATOMIC
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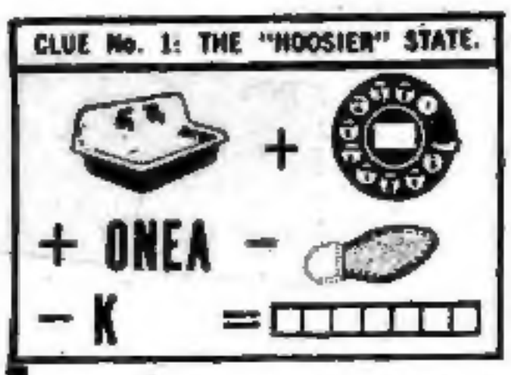

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

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VOL. 8, No. 2
SPRING ISSUE

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FOG OVER VENUS . . . . . **ARTHUR K. BARNES** **10**
John Buckmaster wanted to win Venus—to beat the jungle and dare the fog, and face the sharpest operator in the whole solar system

A Classic Novelet

ATOMIC! . . . . . **HENRY KUTTNER** **60**
Mutants were dangerous, but none were more dangerous than the lake

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PYGMALION'S SPECTACLES . . . . . **STANLEY G. WEINBAUM** **40**
He put on the glasses—and found that he was in love with a dream

NO MORE FRICTION . . . . . **DR. DAVID H. KELLER** **53**
With his little box, Timothy Tompkins could put the world on skids

THE PIPER . . . . . **RAY BRADBURY** **80**
Kerac hated the men who despoiled Mars, but he had a song to play!

Two New Stories

THE QUICK THINKERS . . . . . **CHARLES FOSTER** **90**
She was taller than he was, but he really made her look up to him!

THE BLUE PRIMROSES . . . . . **CHARLES A. STEARNS** **101**
Would the heart machine ever be able to beat a man at his own game?

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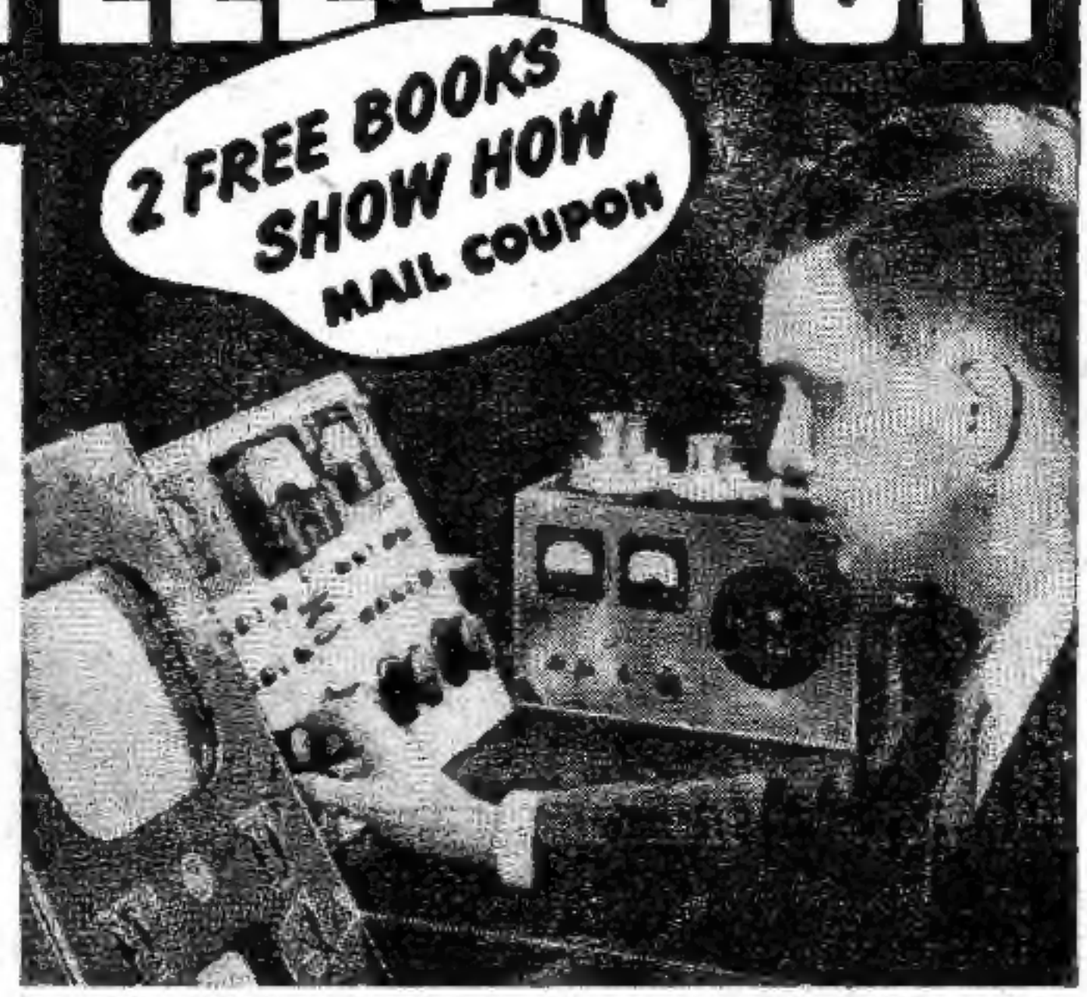

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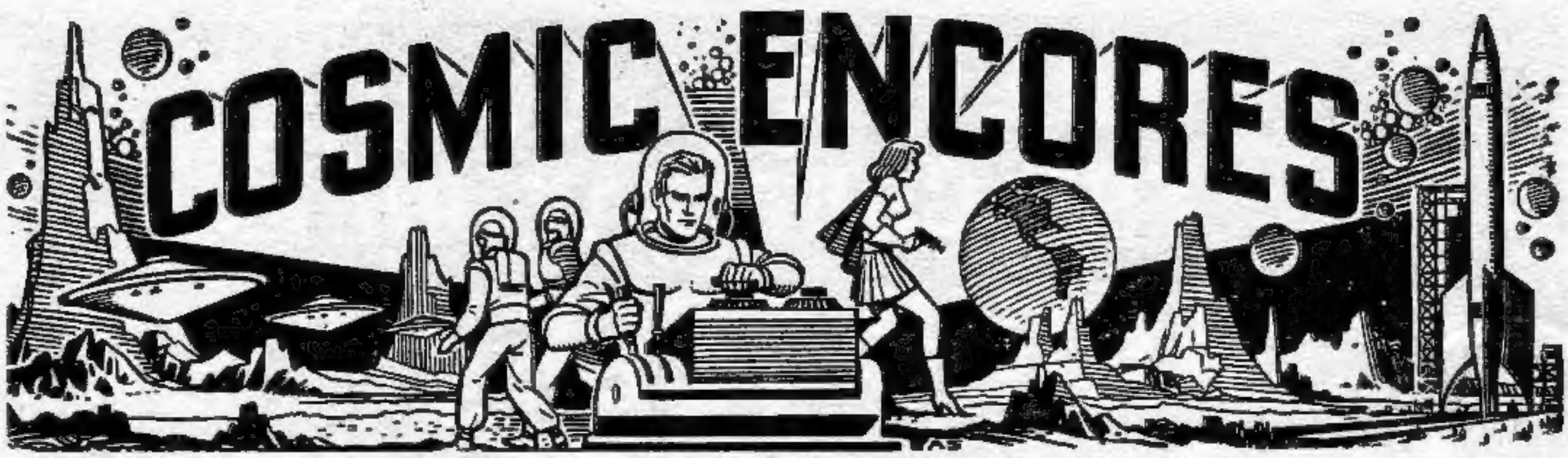

A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE-FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

THE basic question in science fiction is, "Where are we going?" Of course, a writer can't be satisfied with giving a bare answer to this question because he's got to tell a story as well. More often than not, the answer is implied rather than stated openly and can be found in the background which makes the story intelligent and convincing.

Formerly, science fiction writers were concerned mainly with scientific development. They wrote about startling inventions and astonishing technological advances which would make a whole new world for men to live in. However, in recent years we've all been aware of a new trend: the emphasis on physical science and adventure has given way to sociology and psychology and semantics and speculation about the place of the individual in future society.

For a couple of decades, most science fiction heroes were busy adjusting the universe to suit simple schemes and goals; now we find more heroes who adjust themselves or their contemporaries to the demands of society, and the goals are appropriately more complex.

This isn't, I feel, merely a matter of the increasing sophistication and subtlety of science fiction literature, encouraged by three or four editors, but is above and beyond that a sign of the times—a sign that our climate of opinion now contains a value judgment heavily in favor of "adjustment." Books like *1984* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley ask the question, "Adjustment to what?"—and the problem of the future is seen in the form of a speculation about what is going to be done with the individual.

The Changing American Character

In the light of all this, science fiction writers —and readers—might do well to look into the works of David Riesman, a social scientist whose studies of "the changing American character" have received much notice in recent months. *Time* gave Riesman a tacit nod of approval by featuring him on the cover and summarizing his ideas about how our culture is changing. His books sell briskly, the best known of them being *The Lonely Crowd* (1946). Last year a collection of scattered writings was published under the title, *Individualism Reconsidered*—which, incidentally, contained a satirical story which might be classified as science fiction *(The Nylon War)*.

What does Riesman believe about "the American character," and where does he think we are going? Briefly, he feels that a new social type is emerging, and he doesn't wholly approve the "new man." He distinguishes two types of individual in the past, finds a third growing to prominence in the present, and would like to see a fourth take advantage of the best elements of the other three for the future. Here are the types.

Character Types

1. *The tradition-directed man.* This is the character-type which predominates in a society without much change either in technology or population. Each generation wants to live in the same way and obey the same rules as the generation immediately preceding. The son works in almost the same way his father did and shares the same beliefs. This was the way society was organized during feudal times, and the adherence to tradition was broken up only by the Renaissance-Reformation, when Western Europe started to expand. Great sections of the world are still under the sway of sheer tradition, and are only now beginning to change under the impact of Western technology. Generally speaking, the American character doesn't

(Continued on page 8)

Do You Laugh Your Greatest Powers Away?

THOSE STRANGE INNER URGES

You have heard the phrase, "Laugh, clown, laugh." Well, that fits me perfectly. I'd fret, worry and try to reason my way out of difficulties — all to no avail; then I'd have a hunch, a something within that would tell me to do a certain thing. I'd laugh it off with a shrug. I knew too much, I thought, to heed these impressions. Well, it's different now—I've learned to use this inner power and I no longer make the mistakes I did, because I do the right thing at the right time.

This FREE BOOK Will Prove What Your Mind Can Do!

Here is how I got started right. I began to think there must be some inner intelligence with which we were born. In fact, I often heard it said there was; but how could I use it, how could I make it work for me daily? That was my problem. I wanted to learn to direct this inner voice, master it if I could. Finally, I wrote to the Rosicrucians, a world-wide fraternity of progressive men and women, who offered to send me, without obligation, a free book entitled *The Mastery of Life.*

That book opened a new world to me. I advise *you* to write today and ask for your copy. *It will prove to you* what your mind can demonstrate. Don't go through life laughing your mental powers away. Use the coupon below or write: Scribe L.C.L.

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have a great deal of "tradition-direction" in it.

2. *The inner-directed man.* This character-type is immediately more familiar to us, and Riesman feels that it predominated in the United States throughout the 19th century and in the 20th century up to about 1920. Whereas the tradition-directed man has his life strictly supervised by time-honored opinions and rituals every step of the way, the inner-directed man is given certain lifelong goals and turned loose to achieve them in the best way he can. He is "directed' by tradition in the sense that his principles are learned from the past, but he is the captain of his fate in a way that the tradition-directed man can never be. The inner-directed man can be thought of as possessing an internal gyroscope which keeps him on the path despite a changing environment. (The tradition-directed man doesn't need a gyroscope as long as his social environment isn't changing.)

Other-Directed Men

The entrepreneur of the 19th century was the prime example of inner-direction—the steel magnate, the railroad baron, the Wall Street financier, and all the men who struggled and took risks with the problems of production. But what happens when production is no longer the problem it was? Does society need a person with this kind of drive, and does it encourage his existence? Apparently not, says Riesman, who sees a third type on the rise.

3. *The other-directed man.* This character-type doesn't have the internal self-reliance of the inner-directed man, and cannot rely on permanent externals as does the tradition-directed man. What can he use to direct himself through life? His answer is simple—*others.* Instead of a self-stabilizing gyroscope, he carries a radar set. He is always sensitive to what others are doing and feeling, and he carefully adjusts himself accordingly. His sense of direction comes from his friends and from the mass media—from television, the movies, and newspapers. Being socially "accepted" and well-liked is extremely important to the other-directed man, and if he feels he's not getting "approval" he suffers from deep anxiety.

These are the three types to be found in greatest numbers in our present world, according to Riesman. Obviously, he feels that we're becoming more mass-influenced as individuals, more standardized, more open to suggestion. In a sense, the other-directed man has deserted himself, abandoned to others his principles or his *right* to principles. He cannot respect himself as long as he wins no liking or respect from those around him, and life without the all-powerful "others" is meaningless. From this description, it's clear that the other-directed man is an unsatisfying prospect for the future, but who could take his place?

4. *The autonomous man.* Riesman's answer is a definition—a definition based on the assumption that men can rise above "adjustment" and "approval." The autonomous man is one who rules himself, who is able to live at peace with himself long enough to find out what he likes and enjoys without reference to whether or not his contemporaries like the same thing. Instead of "adjust," Riesman says "play." He advises cutting loose from an ever-present sense of necessity (inherent in the three previous types) to find out what sort of non-work activity will be inherently pleasing.

Play, in Riesman's vocabulary, is a big word which means much more than hobbies, art, music, or parties. It typifies an attitude toward life, an openness to ideas, a curiosity about everything that doesn't prevent curiosity about something else from arising.

Riesman hopes that the autonomous man will be the man of the future. In a culture in which other-directed men are numerically superior, the autonomous man will have new ideas and stimulating attitudes which set the tone for others.

The four classifications outlined by Riesman are not to be taken as mutually exclusive or rigidly applicable in a historical sense. They are elements or traits which can be found combined in most of us at one time or another—which is as it should be. However, if we bring them out into the open and discuss them as Riesman has done in his books, we can *choose* to pursue and encourage one trend more than the others—and as long as we keep up the process of conscious choice, we're being in some measure autonomous.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

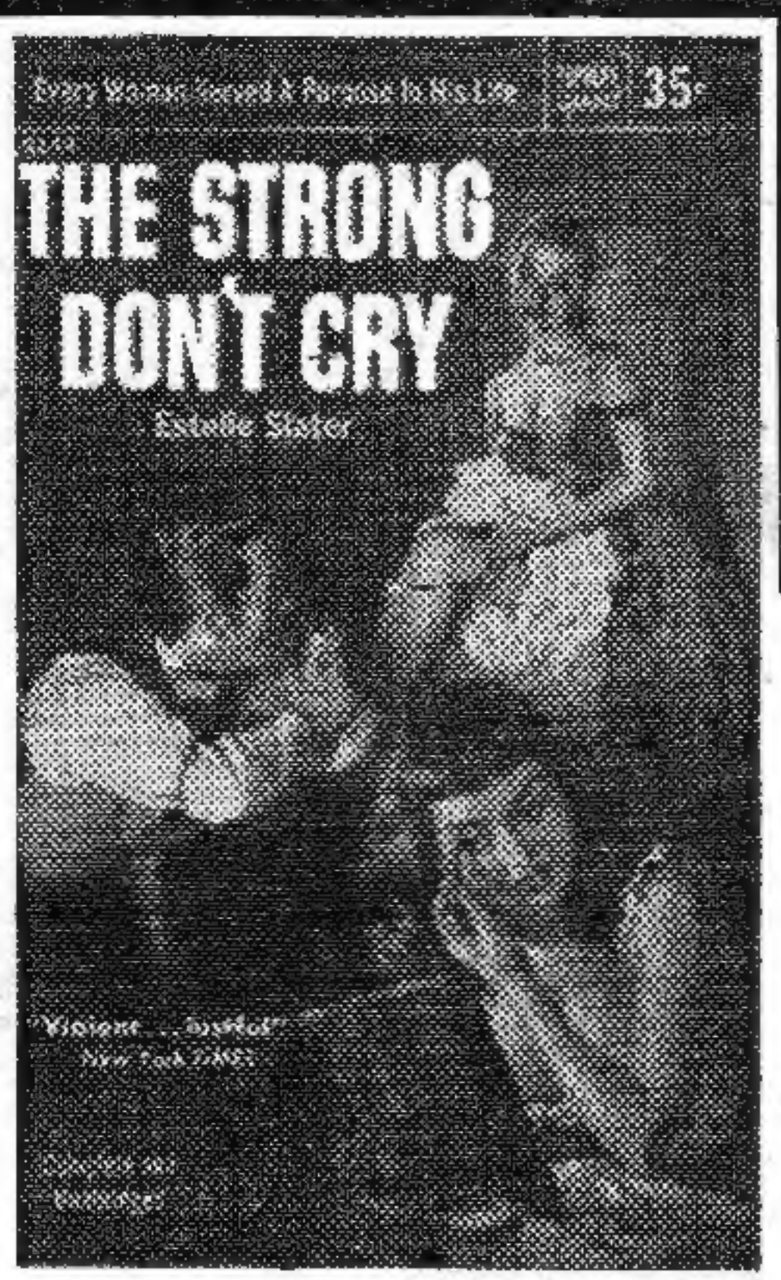
HE LIKED PETE
by Ron Ellik

Dear Editor: WAHOO!!! Manx is back—or should I say, Manx is still here!? Moremoremoremoremoremoreandyetmore, please. Who could grow tired? And better yet, Kuttner's *Atomic* will be

(Continued on page 110)

"WHEN I MARRIED HIM I WAS DRAGGED TO HIS DEPTHS...

My husband had
big-shot ambitions.
But deep-inside he was only a
cheap, small-time gambler."



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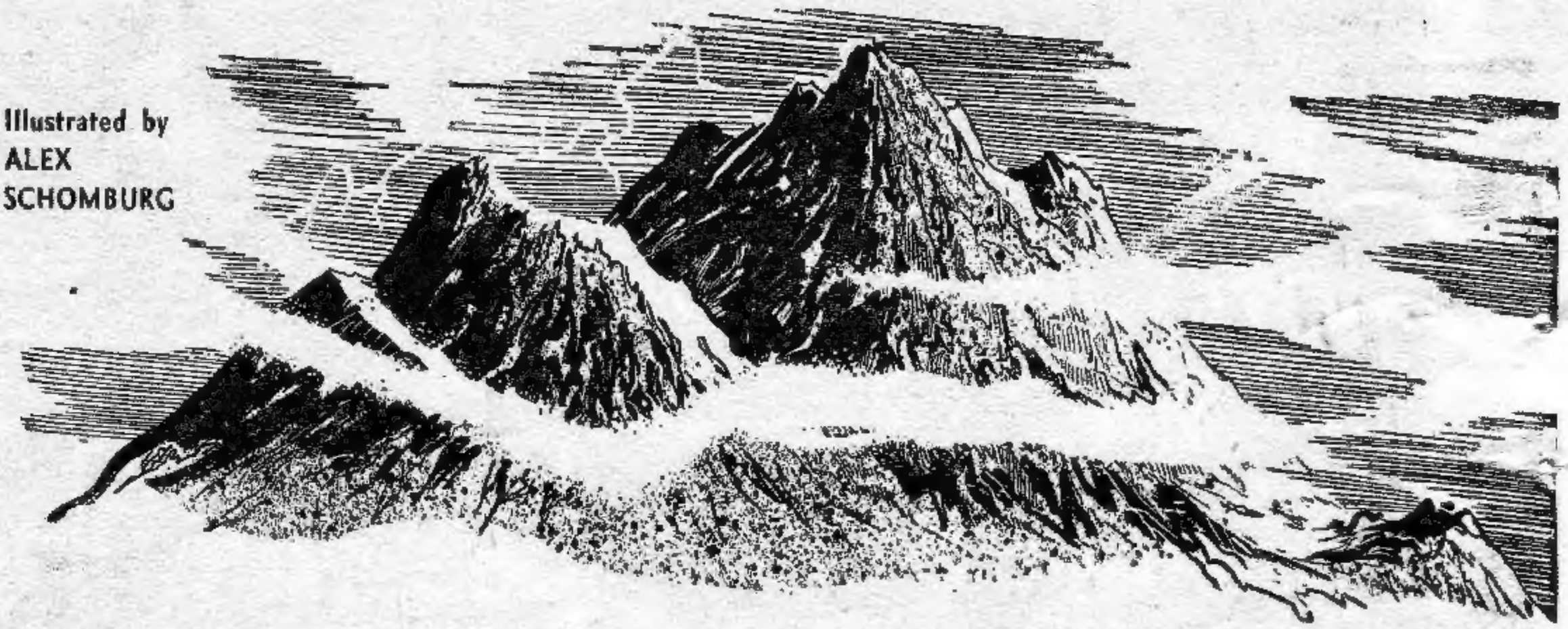

Fog Over Venus

A Novel by ARTHUR K. BARNES

Buckmaster wanted to win Venus—to beat the jungle, the fog, and the sharpest operator in the solar system

I

Gamble in Pioneering

The transition, in the history of Venus, from frontier wilderness to progressive civilization, was not the customary gradual process. It was telescoped into a few short years largely by the efforts of one man, John Buckmaster, whose familiar face and form may be seen in immortal bronze in nearly every city and town on Venus's only continent. Such has been the controversy over the beneficent achievements of this engineer; that his exploits now lie in the realm of myth and legend.

Universal History, Vol. 3—Hamilton.

SO MUCH for the poor historian, with his nose to the factual grindstone! Never were his limitations more thoroughly manifest than in this instance when, with his glib and sterile prose, he dismisses as mere mythology one

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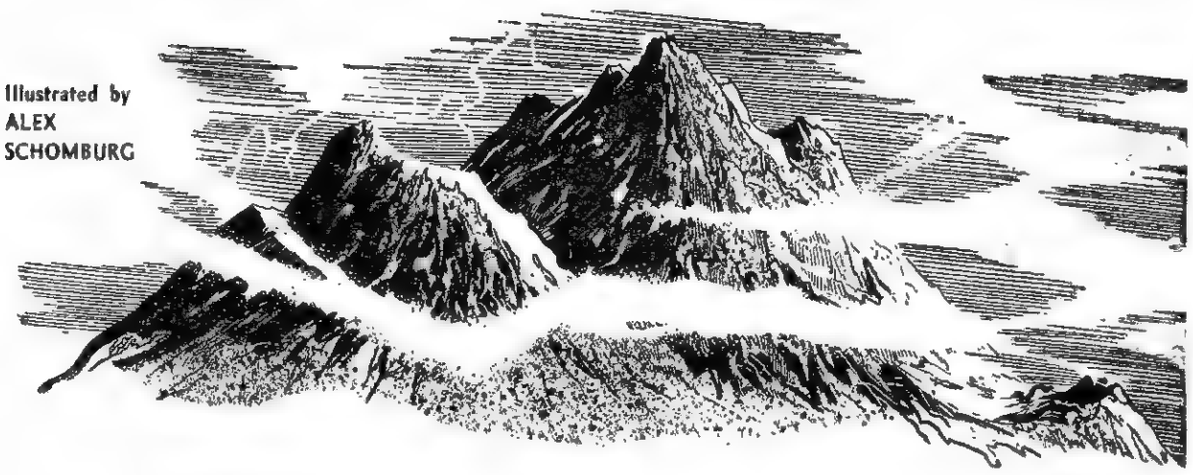

Illustrated by
ALEX
SCHOMBURG

Fog Over Venus

A Novel by **ARTHUR K. BARNES**

Buckmaster wanted to win Venus—to beat the jungle,
the fog, and the sharpest operator in the solar system

I

Gamble in Pioneering

The transition, in the history of Venus, from frontier wilderness to progressive civilization, was not the customary gradual process. It was telescoped into a few short years largely by the efforts of one man, John Buckmaster, whose familiar face and form may be seen in immortal bronze in nearly every city and town on Venus's only continent. Such has been the controversy over the beneficent achievements of this engineer, that his exploits now lie in the realm of myth and legend.

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KEE
SCHOMBURG

of the most fascinating chapters of Man's conquest of the worlds.

As this is written, the author has before him several books—histories, journals, bound newspaper volumes—a bit of an old folksong, the cracked and yellowing scrap of a famous ad-film and a yet unpublished diary. Within them lies a great story, one of struggle and heartbreak and triumph over bitter odds. Its protagonist is a man of heroic proportions. Whether one applauds him or hates him, he demands attention.

So that future historians will not cheat their readers because of any literary blind spot, the epic of John Buckmaster deserves, however inadequately, to be re-told.

WHERE he came from, no one knew. Or if his antecedents were known to anyone, the secret was well kept. He simply materialized one morning through the fetid Venusian mists, moving quietly along the electrified barrier that surrounded the frontier town named Venusopolis.

As he approached the entrance, the condenser capacity of his body activated a weak lamp. He checked his gun, medipak, and remains of his rations in an outside locker and allowed the photo-electric spy-ray to look him over for concealed weapons.

Somewhere in the gray fog came a hoarse squeal and angry thrashing as an unseen monster blundered into the protective barrier and got well burned for his carelessness. A handful of armored insects whizzed shrilly past in the murk, snapping through the jungle growth like so many bullets. A hot rain drizzled down, smoking off the coppery roofs of the scattered buildings within the town.

When it ceased, the air would again become thick with Venus's thousand and one odors—cloying flower-perfumes, musk-like animal smells, the sweet scent of blood, and the ever-present effluvium of decay. The oily river which moved sluggishly around the town was filled with queerly anonymous chunks of debris, as if the very heart of the continent were rotting to fragments with disease, then crumbling and being washed away.

Through this drab world of destruction John Buckmaster moved with the unconcern of the experienced pioneer. Having given the right answers to the spy-ray, he entered Venusopolis and stepped into one of the handy quarantine booths. The last lynching in that town had been caused by a botanist who thoughtlessly brought an epidemic with him from the jungle.

Quickly Buckmaster stripped, allowing antiseptic rays and gases to sterilize clothes and body. Though he was not tall, his shoulders nearly split open the side walls of the little stall. Massive muscles rippled beneath a skin that had "prospector's pallor," the result of too long a stay under Venus's clouds without benefit of ultraviolet.

Ritual completed, he dressed and entered the town proper, an ugly collection of cheap and cheerless pre-fabs scattered about, with an occasional resort or gin mill. A rickshaw, pulled by a stooped and scaly infected native, rolled through the mud to the largest and gaudiest of these gambling joints. On it was the single word, "Belle's."

At this hour of day there was only one customer, a tall, lean man in his middle thirties, with the half-worried, half-bored frown of a chow dog. He stood before a roulette lay-out, making a peculiar bet which the croupier seemed to find annoying. He wagered thirty-five chips, worth five credits apiece, placing one on each of the available thirty-seven squares except numbers one and zero. The croupier spun the wheel, flipped the ball.

"Twenty-two," he said resignedly. "Twenty-two wins."

The lean man's grin was a brief candle, quickly flashing, then extinguished. At odds of thirty-five to one, including the chip on number twenty-two, he now had thirty-six chips. He was five credits to the good.

Buckmaster moved quietly alongside.

"How long has this been going on?" he asked the croupier.

The gambler looked sour. "Every morning he does it. Just the one bet. Every day he wins five credits. I ask you, is it sporting?"

"I'm not here for sport," said the lean man. "I'm waiting for a friend, and it takes five credits a day to live in this dump. I figured the odds in my favor were pretty good when I started out on this stunt, and so far I haven't hit the one or the zero yet."

"Ah!" said Buckmaster. "The scientific mind."

The lean man's head snapped back, he whirled to look at Buckmaster for the first time.

"John!" he shouted. This time his smile was more prolonged. "So you really made it." There was huge relief in his voice.

Buckmaster nodded. "I said I would. And I did. Fred, have you been wasting your time worrying about me?"

Fred Carle cocked an eyebrow. "You've been roaming through this pest-hole for five straight months—enough to kill off the toughest old sourdough on the planet."

"Forget it. I did everything I started out to do. Now we're ready to go places. Where's that precious baggage of yours?"

"Right here at Belle's. She has the biggest safe in town. And since she's a woman, I thought even the hard-shelled crew of thugs and murderers hiding out on this rotten globe would think twice before robbing her."

"Let's go."

THEY moved down the long gambling room to the office at the rear. Buckmaster knocked shortly and went in. A blond woman of thirty or so, tall and solidly built and dressed in the immemorial tradition of the gambling queen, looked up from a desk. She was Belle Courtney, best-known and most popular person on a planet rich with rowdy and colorful characters. Her lips curled up in a wide, astonished grin of delight.

"Well, John!" she cried in a husky voice. "So you really made it." She wagged her head in admiring wonderment.

Buckmaster smiled. "Just what Fred said."

They shook hands man-fashion, though there was more than just friendship in Belle's eyes. She looked at Fred Carle.

"Your stuff's still in the safe, Fred. Want it?"

"Please. And thanks a million for keeping it."

Belle manipulated the dials and switches of a complicated burglar-proof old-fashioned steel box and withdrew two large, heavy suitcases. The men each took one.

"On your way?" the woman said.

Buckmaster nodded. "But we'll be back soon, with the tools to remodel this whole planet and make it fit for humans. When we return we'll bring civilization with us."

No one smiled at the grandiloquence. There was a quiet, confident power about John Buckmaster that gave his words prophetic meaning. Instead, Belle Courtney poured a toast.

"To the new Venus, and its master," she said.

They drank it solemnly.

As Buckmaster and Carle turned to leave, Belle spoke again.

"Fred says you hope to interest Ichabod Devaux."

"Right."

"You know what kind of a reputation he has?"

"Thoroughly." Buckmaster had a nice smile when he wanted to use it. "Look. Surely you're not worrying about me!"

"Of course," Belle said half jokingly. "You know my hopeless infatuation. You persist in doing such reckless things and Devaux's mighty bad medicine in his own league, John. Still, I suppose you know your own business."

"You may rely on that, Belle. Thanks for the kind thoughts, though."

With the steaming rain beating against their shoulders, the two men marched through the mud to the government land office. Here Buckmaster filed several applications which he had produced from an air-tight wallet.

The clerk pored over them several minutes.

"Two permanent land claims, one for each of you," he said. "You understand, of course, that a person may own outright only one section of land."

Bu kmaster agreed.

"These others, then, are government leases," the clerk continued. "You understand, also, that these government-owned leases expire within a year unless certain specified improvements are carried out?"

Buckmaster again agreed. The clerk checked the requested leases on his huge irregular course down the entire length of Venus' only continent. The clerk looked curiously at his customers, but managed to say nothing as he completed and certified the registrations. Then he checked the locations of the two permanent claims. This time his astonishment was too great to be suppressed.

"But one of these seems to be on the top of Mt. Apollo!" he burst out. "It's over four miles high, the highest mountain on the planet. Do you mean you actually climbed it, and left your markers and everything?"

Buckmaster nodded calmly, imperturbably.

"You must be the first Earthman who's ever managed it, then. And why? you couldn't pick a more worthless and inaccessible spot on Venus."

"Maybe he likes the view," suggested Carle.

The baffled clerk gave a shrug. Having become convinced he was dealing with harmless madmen, he finished the filings. As the men turned to go, Carle could not resist one last dig at the bewildered clerk.

"Mark this date well, young man. In years to come you'll remember it as one of the red-letter days of your life."

OUTDOORS, the rain had ceased. A sticky breeze brought with it occasional clots of spores and ugly bacteria, rendered harmless as they passed through the protective UV screen which rayed out from a central tower umbrella-fashion.

Carle hailed a double rickshaw, and for the last time they rolled through Venusopolis's muck. This final trip ended at the space-port, where Buckmaster's sturdy little Hartz-Cunningham nestled patiently in the starting cradle, completely covered with preservative grease.

"Not much to look at," said Buckmaster. "But she'll be home to us for a few weeks."

"Blasting off for Earth right away? Aren't you going to eat or get some sleep first?"

"Plenty of time for that en route. As it is, life's too short for the things that lie ahead of us, Fred. Let's go."

Carle stowed the baggage and made last-minute mechanical checkups in a preoccupied manner. As Buckmaster returned with clearance papers and a pre-plotted course chart from the Port Chief's office, his friend spoke hesitantly.

"Belle was right about that Devaux, John," he said. "I'd enjoy this adventure a lot more if we didn't have anything to do with that man. Is it absolutely necessary?"

"No, but I have reasons. I'll tell you in due time, Fred."

Carle strapped himself in place for the blast-off. "I don't like it," he said, and shivered suddenly, almost foreboding'y.

II

Vision of Empire

ICHABOD DEVAUX was among the ten wealthiest men on Earth. Tall and slender; with iron-gray hair and ice-gray eyes, he looked every inch the wicked financial tycoon. It was whispered that he had made almost as many

enemies as dollars, a rumor of which he was proud. He had started with a shoestring and gone straight to the top by kicking his friends in the face.

He stared coldly at John Buckmaster and Fred Carle. "Young men, you have forced your way into my office by hypnotizing my secretary, threatening my bodyguard, and giving everyone you encountered ingenious excuses. I trust all this enterprise and energy is not being wasted in an effort to sell me an encyclopedia."

Buckmaster was calmness personified as he sat down in a luxurious Body-line chair. "Not an encyclopedia, Mr. Devaux," he said. "A partnership."

"You're too generous."

Buckmaster ignored the sarcasm. "You're a big man, Mr. Devaux. Own many properties, wield considerable power."

"I treasure your compliments."

"But compared with what I'm about to offer you, everything you've achieved in a lifetime will look like so much chicken-feed."

Devaux's eyebrows raised, on the outer edges, to form a shallow V.

"So?" he said.

"I hold out to you on a platter—not a fortune, nor even an empire—but a whole world! The planet Venus."

Devaux choked and began to laugh. "Venus! A magnificent gift, indeed. Why, it's nothing but a raw, ill-smelling frontier, a pesthole whose chief products are monsters, disease, and—adventurers. I hate all three."

"Exactly, Mr. Devaux. Well put. Venus is an undeveloped pioneer planet today. A place where men take incredible chances in the hope of striking it rich before jungle death cuts them down. For each lucky one, a hundred fail or die. Most people regard it simply as the place where Gerry Carlyle gathered some of her finest specimens for the London Interplanetary Zoo—but believe me, Venus is ripe for exploitation. It's a plum to be picked off by the first man who offers a solution to the age-old problem of frontier development—transportation."

"Um." Devaux had forgotten his ironies. He ran two fingers along his thin, rapacious nose.

"No need to tell you that law and civilization always follow transportation in a new world. That's history. Now at present there's no sort of transportation on Venus offering economical movement of supplies and passengers. Planes are impossible in the eternal mist. Rocket ships can move over a planet's surface, of course, but the necessarily constant blasting against gravity makes this impracticable for a business enterprise. Takeoffs and landings are especially prodigal in the expenditure of fuel. Even flimsy passenger crates, guided by radio beam, are too expensive to operate. Rockets would have to carry more fuel than freight, actually. Mathematics will prove that."

"Yes, you've made your point. But then what? Do I gather that you and your friend have the answer to this knotty problem?"

"Absolutely." Quietly but compellingly Buckmaster pictured the Venusian continent as checkered by countless orderly plantations, dozens of productive mining ventures, small industries, all neatly linked together by feeder systems to a main transcontinental trunk line. "And as owners of this system, of course, we will be literally the masters of an entire world."

Devaux's eyes had begun to glitter. He was interested.

"Show me," he said abruptly.

THE three men went up to the roof garden, where Carle opened the two suitcases and began to set up his demonstration. Buckmaster showed Devaux a multi-celled plaque, about one foot square, constructed of an odd-looking alloy.

"The Buckmaster Thermocouple. It's a new conception. I had the original idea, but Carle—he's an experimental physicist—developed and improved it

tremendously. It transforms sunlight into a beam of power which stretches between two broadcasting and receiving towers like a string. See?"

Carle had placed two spindly structures about twenty yards apart, almost like twin Eiffel Towers. Taking the two model thermocouples, he put them face upward in the sunshine and attached tiny cables from them leading to the towers. Then he took from one of the bags a little vehicle, roughly cigar-shaped with a box-like contrivance sitting atop it like a wart.

"Show him, Fred," commanded Buckmaster.

Carle ran his fingers through his hair in a worried gesture.

"This thing on the car is a sort of armature, you might say," said Carle. "The power beam passes through it. There's some electrical leakage from the beam, and the leakage is what the armature operates upon."

The scientist stooped, put the car in place, moved a tiny switch. Instantly it flashed along the invisible line between the two towers in uncanny fashion, to smack solidly against the further one. There it hung suspended in mid-air, apparently by black magic.

"This is only a toy, of course," continued Carle. "You could jerk the model off the beam with a good yank, but with a full-sized car and high power beam, it would be as safe and solid as a monorail and completely immune to Venusian fog or weather."

Devaux's eyes were definitely predatory now. He inspected the layout closely, trying to see the power beam which was undetectable except for an occasional sparking or hum. He ran the car back and forth several times.

"You say this is, in effect, a beam of electricity?"

"No-o. It's electronic in nature. But to be frank, we're not exactly sure what it is. The discovery was made almost by accident. More than that we'd rather not say yet."

"How much will it cost to operate your full-scale system?"

"Not a single cent. That's the beauty of the plan. Our source of power is the Sun, inexhaustible. On Venus, twenty-five million miles nearer the Sun than we, there's an inconceivable amount of power available just for the taking—given a science that knows just how to take."

Devaux walked with nervous jerkiness to the parapet and back again, which was as near to showing excitement as he ever came.

"There is a bit of a hitch in your scheme as I see it," he said. "Just how are you going to make use of sunlight through three or four miles of presumably impenetrable Venusian clouds?"

Carle's quick grin flashed momentarily, and he looked at his partner. Buckmaster produced a cigarette, lighted it, and blew a perfect smoke ring. He pointed at it.

"Vortex ring," he replied. "All the energy in that ring is chained within itself. Similar principle is now used in a small way in factories to disperse soot and smoke and dust high into the upper atmosphere, so as not to contaminate the city air."

Devaux stared. "You mean to say you can punch a hole clear through the mists of Venus? Why, it'd take a fantastic amount of power to maintain your openings."

Buckmaster shook his head impatiently. "You still don't grasp the fact, Mr. Devaux, that we have on hand more power than any human being ever dreamed of before. Unlimited. It's the cheapest and most plentiful element of the entire operation."

The financier pondered some more. "True. True. But you won't have access to that power until you carve at least one hole through the fog. Where will you get the power for that initial carving? Have you bright young men thought of that?"

Buckmaster sighed faintly. "You underestimate us, I'm afraid," he answered. "Have you ever heard of Mt.

From her office, Belle could see the entire workings

Apollo? No? It's the highest point on Venus. So high that it pierces the mists half the time and is exposed to the Sun. This same peak is the one that enabled early astronomers to calculate Venus' rotation. It will enable us to generate our first power beam without interference and shoot it down to a receiver below.

"From there on we just run our chain of towers across the continent as far apart as possible without permitting the planet's curvature to interrupt the beam. With the power from one unit, we open up the clouds and tap the sunlight, then shoot the beam to the next unit, open the clouds again, and so on."

Devaux was sold. It could be seen in the excited way he prowled about the roof. Greed and lust for power almost visibly oozed from his skin.

"If I should go into this proposition —if, mind you—it must be understood, as always in these cases, that the investor retains control of the company," said Devaux. "At least fifty-one per cent of the stock must be mine."

Buckmaster laughed outright. "If I insisted on control, you'd spit on the mere suggestion. That's the way I feel about your proposition. Fifty-fifty, Mr. Devaux. that's the only way we can do

business, and you know it."

For a moment something ugly showed in the depths of the millionaire's eyes. "I see. I put up the money, millions of dollars, no doubt. Whereas you put in the patents for your inventions. That it?"

"Exactly. Carle will supervise building the scientific equipment, and I'll engineer the project."

"You know a call from me would bring a dozen guards," Devaux said thinly. "I could relieve you of that thermocouple and your demonstration apparatus and any other designs you may be carrying with you, and be in a position to form my own company. Your energetic assistance would no longer be required, and certainly no law officer would take your word over mine."

"Yes, you might be able to get away with that. But you won't try it."

"And why not?"

"Because I own that vital mountaintop, that's why," was Buckmaster's gentle reply.

With those words Buckmaster lashed Devaux as if with an invisible glove. In effect he told the millionaire that he had come there expecting treachery and was prepared to counter it. It was a challenge. Devaux's face tightened so that the bones became prominent. He stared at Buckmaster a long while.

"I believe you and I can make a deal," Devaux said at last. "Leave me whatever you have in the way of engineering estimates. Call me Monday morning, about ten." He smiled.

It was the smile of a hangman as he adjusts the hood . . .

BACK in the hotel suite, with the precious inventions secure in a safe-deposit vault, Carle's accumulated fears and worries burst out.

"I don't like it, John," he said. "Now I've seen Devaux, I trust him less than ever. He's a shark. A financial shark. I think we're fools to have anything to do with him. We're children compared to him in the world of business. He'll smash us with about as much mercy as a shark feels for a sardine."

"Of course he will –if he can."

Carle's eyes widened. "You mean you deliberately went to Devaux, knowing that he's going to crook us out of the picture?"

Buckmaster was as calm as Carle was jittery. He was relaxed in a comfortable Flex-air by the room-length window, as if he intended to stay there until Monday morning, imperturbable as a figure carved of stone.

"Yes," he replied. "I did. I know, sure as Fate, that Devaux will try to squeeze us out. It's the man's nature. He can't bear to share power equally with anyone else. In fact, I think I can guess how he intends to go about it."

"But why, John? Why?" Carle had the jumps in earnest now.

"Venus is on the verge of great things, Fred. Success will require at first an iron-willed, just ruler. But not Devaux. His greed would wreck everything. Nor can two men rule side by side. No, the coming benevolent despot of Venus can be only one man—John Buckmaster."

Carle choked. "You mean you think you can outsmart that old fox at his own game?"

"Every fox has its hound."

The scientist's brow furrowed in his dog-like expression of concentration as he carefully sought out his friend's meaning.

"Then—let me get this straight. You team up with Devaux knowing he's going to try and steal the whole works from us, because you plan to take it away from him. Your conscience wouldn't let you do that to an honest partner. But Devaux's inevitable crookedness makes anything you do justifiable. Is that it?"

Buckmaster nodded earnestly. "Excellently put. I'll consider our project complete only on the day Devaux signs over control of the corporation to me."

Carle flopped onto a window seat, shaking his head over this curious com-

bination of ruthlessness and high personal integrity.

"Gosh, what a fight that's going to be." Then recollection smote him. "Say! That explains one thing that had me puzzled. When we were on the roof, and you were telling Devaux about your vortex-ring invention, you held something back."

They exchanged glances, grinning. But Carle's amusement slowly died away, and when he looked at Buckmaster again, there was apprehension in his eyes.

"Sometimes I think I don't know you at all, John. You're so implacable."

What he was trying to express was the vaguely defined fear of the little man caught up in the irresistible and destructive tides of a battle between giants. For it was a duel of giants in the making. man against man and man against Nature, with the greatest of all prizes at stake and the forces of the cosmos itself involved.

AT THAT very moment Ichabod Devaux was hatching trouble for Buckmaster in his communi-vision conference room, facing five life-size dimensional screens which reflected the transmitted likeness of five of his most trusted intimates in the subtle art of high financial crime.

"— to form a dummy company at the start, without my name ever appearing in the picture" he was saying. "Between the five of you there should be no trouble landing a government concession for the project. Sun-Beam, Incorporated, might make a nice name. It will please the romantic Mr. Buckmaster who thinks so highly of himself and so poorly of me."

The five second-string financiers looked at one another via the screens uneasily. Someone gulped audibly. They had heard that ugly tone before and knew it boded ill, indeed, for the rash person who had dared defy Ichabod Devaux.

"However," the financier said, "these government contracts almost invariably have a time-limit clause. Either demonstrate your ability to produce within a year, or bow out. You're familiar with the procedure, of course. Now it was my thought that Mr Buckmaster just might fail to beat his time limit. Sabotage, you know?"

Devaux chuckled with genuine mirth. Actually he found exquisite pleasure in contemplating the ruin of another man.

"This will leave a mess of partially completed work on Venus, and I have no doubt that the government would be more than willing to accept Ichabod Devaux's generous offer to complete the visionary project at his own expense. Responsible citizens like myself, you know, have considerable influence with the government." Everyone laughed this time.

"So I'll offer to re-finance the project under my own name, with you gentlemen as silent and invisible partners, taking over everything bodily. As extra insurance, we might arrange the original financing on a minimum scale, so that when Buckmaster fails he will face bankruptcy and be forced to sell the assets of Sun-Beam, Incorporated, to satisfy his creditors. And I will pick up all his debts beforehand, naturally, so no matter what he does I get the Company. In that way we actually lose nothing while easing our two friends out of the picture."

Devaux's associates nodded. It was a scheme beautifully simple and typically merciless. They discussed briefly its various angles.

"Do you have a particular person in mind to—ah—guide our policy on Venus?" someone asked. "An undercover operative, so to speak?"

"Indeed, yes. My son-in-law Loren Hanssen, whom you have all met, is a construction engineer. He's done a few jobs for me in a dilettante fashion. At least he's had sufficient experience to know what's bad for a project like this."

The questioner sniggered. "Keeping the dirty work all in the family, eh?"

"We'll have to make sure, of course, that Buckmaster includes the blueprints of his thermocouple, armature, and vortex-ring generators in his contribution to the corporation," urged another voice. "Also the deed to that mountain-top."

Devaux smiled sourly. "Trust you, Hostetter, to put the obvious into words," he replied with customary sarcasm. "Now get this, all of you. I want no mistakes. This thing is big. And believe me, I don't care to what lengths it's necessary to go. Ichabod Devaux intends to be master of Venus."

"Yes, Mr. Devaux," came the assenting chorus, accompanied by obsequious noddings, and Devaux cut them off abruptly with a slap of a switch. He leaned back, rubbing his hands, quite satisfied with himself. He rather hoped Buckmaster would put up a respectable struggle, just to make it interesting. Devaux enjoyed a fight because the dirty fighter always has the advantage!

III

Skirmish

The inimitable John Buckmaster is credited with having pioneered the employment of special types of human beings for special types of work. This refers not to the long-used psychological selection of workers for their proper positions, but the use of men actually biologically different from most, in work making peculiar physical demands.

For instance, Buckmaster's famous Venusian project required men who could live and work on Mt. Apollo, many thousands of feet in height. Having this purpose in mind he hired a group of specially trained men native to the Andes, a special climato-physiological variety of the human race known as the "Altitude Man." They are characterized by large heart, slow pulse rate, great strength, blood with high capacity for combining with oxygen . . .

Without such shrewdness in using a special type of human, Buckmaster might never have completed the first and most important unit of his historic project. Under the circumstances, however, the Mt. Apollo job proved simplest of all, as not even John Buckmaster could find a type of man who could work in comfort and complete health in the pest-hole of Venus' jungles.

Journal of a Medical Engineer—Squires.

HONKY-TONK-ON-JETS it was called—saloon, dance hall, gambling joint, complete in one compact structure, all mounted on rocket jets so that it could simply blast off from construction camp to construction camp as Sun-Beam's mighty project fought its bitter way the length of Venus' continent. Situated on the edge of Sun-Beam No. 2, in the foothills below Mt. Apollo, under Belle Courtney's management, it offered rough entertainment and forgetfulness to the hard-fisted workers who took their lives into their hands every minute of the day.

From her office Belle could see the entire workings, a rough circle of raw earth about a half mile in diameter carved out of the living jungle and kept clear of growth only by constant application of deadly chemical poisons. In the center rose the gleaming metal spider-work of the tower, up, up, clear past visibility in the mists. Hundreds of feet it would rise when complete, bright symbol of Man's defiance against the storms and decay which were Venus' deadliest weapons against the intruder.

Patterned neatly around the edge of the circle were six huge pits, intended as matrices for the vortex-ring machinery which would push aside the eternal curtain of fog. Two were complete with concrete floor and walls, but the men still fought seepage and mud slides in the others. The chug-a-lug of the pumps never was silent, night or day.

Beside the spindle-work of the tower crouched the massive hydraulic lift, which would raise and lower completely loaded beam-cars to and from the beam without apparent effort. Now it was used to carry the welders and materials up to the unfinished top of the tower.

Belle sometimes mused, as she stared at the workings out her window, on the quenchless flame which drove men like Buckmaster to advance, to conquer. But more often, and with more practicality, she thought of the fortune she would accumulate by sweeping in the leavings of Sun-Beam's employees—if the proj-

ect were successful.

Suddenly a shriek of fear rang out of the fog. For a single instant all sound and activity was suspended breathlessly.

"Blunderbird!" came the shout.

Everyone began to run. Some fled for shelter. Others, weapons in hand, dashed for the lift platform and were whisked up into invisibility, alongside of the tower.

Too late! Death had struck, suddenly and without warning—devastatingly, as death always struck on Venus.

Down from the mist-shrouded tower came a shapeless bundle that had once been a man, hurtling to the ground. A geyser of mud exploded at the impact. Others followed, floating safely down on parachutes, while the hissing crack of proton rifles could be heard three hundred feet overhead.

Then, dropping out of the gloom like a black angel from hell, swooped the blunderbird—a creature having twenty-five feet of leathery wing-spread, ten savage claws on each wing, and a beak like the devil's own scissors. With a weird clasping gesture, it caught up one of the parachutes and ripped it to shreds. Only the fact that the 'chutist was a scant ten feet above the soft, marshy ground saved him from a messy finish.

In senseless fury the monster flopped about seeking more blood to spill. The place was a madhouse of sprinting, yelling men. A girl fled wildy along the balcony walk in front of Belle's place. Suddenly a marksman got a clear shot. The blunderbird's head glowed brightly violet for a moment, then disintegrated with a miniature thunderclap. So great was its vitality, however, that it raged about aimlessly for a full minute before smashing into the base of the tower and collapsing into a malodorous, twitching heap.

BELLE COURTNEY had walked outside. Now she hurried over to where the sharpshooter stood leaning heavily on his weapon. It was Fred Carle. He grinned faintly and extended trembling fingers. "Guess I'm not much of a man of action," he confessed.

"Why, I've never seen a finer wing shot," Belle said. "At the crucial moment, too!"

"But not soon enough to save Sanchez's life. Though it would've been a pity to spoil our record." Carle was bitter. "Not a single day has passed since the construction began that at least one human life hasn't been lost."

Belle grimaced. "But you've equipped the welders with 'chutes. Armed guards protect them. What more can you do? Those blunderbirds will always be attracted and enraged by the torches until the tower's completed."

"Oh, it isn't the monsters so much, though gosh knows we've waged a losing war against most of 'em. It's the disease." He stared up at Worm Hill, where decaying tombstones were like yellow loosening teeth in the slimy, receding gums of the soil. Already grave-diggers were scooping out Sanchez' last resting place. They didn't allow dead bodies to lie around long. Nor did they bother with coffins.

"When any one of a dozen fevers strikes, no matter what our doctors do, the man has only a fifty-fifty chance to survive. And of those who do, ten per cent are hopeless wrecks for months or years to come."

A foul breeze sprang up, like a breath from a crematory, and ugly clusters of spores and bacteria cultures sailed aimlessly through the camp. Belle and Carle scraped them off where they clung to their clothing, hastening back to the shelter of Belle's amusement resort. Another man awaited them there, a massive, blond young giant whose teeth flashed often and who swaggered just a trifle as he walked. He was Loren Hanssen, assistant engineer in charge of unit B—while Buckmaster handled unit C far to the south—a man who knew only too well how handsome he looked.

"Well, well, Carle," he said heartily. "Where'd you drop in from?"

"The factory, of course. Running short of supplies."

"Oh, to be sure. Sorry to greet you with the accident a few minutes ago. Bit of bad luck—that."

"You seem to be having quite a number of bits of bad luck here."

Unit B had been plagued by an epidemic of misplaced tools and odd breakdowns. Hanssen nodded with portentousness.

"Er—suppose there's some technical point I wanted to consult you about on the spur of the moment, Carle," he said. "How'd I get in touch with you at the factory?"

Carle sighed. Only two people in the world knew how to reach that hidden laboratory, Carle and Buckmaster. Its radio frequency was a secret. The workmen who built it had been taken there and returned without being given the slightest clue as to where they were. Even the assistants working in the place at that moment didn't know how to reach civilization. The plant was making the precious thermocouples, the armature for the beam car, and the apparatus with which to push through Venus' mists to the sunlight.

"Hanssen, several times you've tried to find where that factory is. I'm not telling anyone."

"Sounds almost as if you didn't trust me."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?"

HANSSEN laughed easily and strode outside to where his men were standing aimlessly around, leaderless, shocked into inactivity by the tragedy. One of them, a swarthy, slender chap, hurried breathlessly up to the engineer.

"That was my brodder, keeled jost now," protested the workman. "Why? No protection. We're human. We got de right to leeve. Why don't you protect us welders?"

Hanssen laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"My dear Sanchez, I am grieved at your brother's death," he said with warm pseudo-sincerity. "Believe me, I am. It hurts me whenever any of my boys is injured. We try to take all possible precautions. Parachutes. Armed guards."

"Yah! Chewin' the rag down below when they should have been up there!" Sanchez waved wildly toward the hidden top of the tower.

Hanssen shrugged. "Well, slip-ups will happen, you know. After all, boys, I'm just following Mr. Buckmaster's orders."

"Buckmaster," a voice said. "Lot he cares about a few lives."

For an instant the workers' faces, yellowish from constant use of atabrine and other prophylactic drugs, showed something ugly. A murmur rippled from their lips, a formless threat which had no time for real expression, because Hanssen quickly suggested that they break it up. The group dissolved slowly as the men straggled back to half-hearted work. But the seed of disunity had definitely been planted.

Carle and Belle Courtney exchanged a long look.

"A slip-up, he says," grunted the scientist. "Like the emery dust in the pumping machine. And the girders which are six inches too short. And the low-grade concrete."

Belle answered this with nervous abruptness. "I examined the incorporation papers the other day. Devaux's name doesn't appear anywhere. That struck me as—well—ominous, along with the fact that Hanssen is his son-in-law. Does John realize what he's up against?"

"Yes. He knows all about it. I think it's just what he anticipated. It's no use talking to him about the chances he's taking."

"I know," she said. "I was just worried."

Carle glanced at the woman shrewdly. "About the project or about John?"

Belle smiled somberly. "All right, so I have been wearing my heart on my sleeve. Just the same, there's a nasty

situation brewing here, unless things take a turn for the better."

BUT things did not improve. The death rate among the workers crawled slowly upward, as half-trained men replaced those cut down by accident and disease. Buckmaster designed a special helmet with a super-sonic element in the crown, which killed all insect and bacterial life within five feet. Unfortunately, however, few men could endure the inaudible vibration for more than two hours at a stretch. Wearing the helmet longer brought on a mild neuromental disturbance sufficient to incapacitate the worker for two or three days. So the reduction of man-hour losses, due to illness, was not offset.

After the completion of the first stretch there would be infinite power available to bring all science's weapons to bear in the war against the jungle. The workers would be able to live and work in safety and comfort and health. That was one of the things Buckmaster was fighting for. But until that point was reached, the job had to be done at great cost.

In the final analysis, Buckmaster had but one weapon against the natural forces opposing him—human lives, prodigally spent.

To get them, when the lure of high wages proved insufficient, he recruited with a frank advertisement in all the leading telefilm services of the world.

M-E-N

Men With Courage Men With Vision

No Others Need Apply

Sun-Beam, Inc., wants he-men construction workers with the above qualifications for its projejct on Venus. The job is hard and dangerous. Despite safety measures our employees daily risk their lives.

Our contract with you will be for six months at high wages. After that period of service you will be free to establish yourself, with every assistance and encouragement by the Company, on plantation or mining property of your choosing within reach of the Beam-line. Preferential freight rates will be allowed. With luck, you will be independently wealthy in five years.

If you have the courage to gamble six months of your life against security and independence, Sun-Beam, Inc. wants you.

They came.

Not in great numbers, but in a steady trickle of man-power. Some lasted out their six months' servitude. Others were shipped back to Earth physically broken. Still more died on Venus. It was like slaughter on a minor battlefield.

Even Belle Courtney was once driven to protest in horrified pity.

"Is it worth the cost, John?" she asked Buckmaster. "After all, what are you achieving that's worth all this expenditure of blood?"

Buckmaster's answer was to set his jaw in iron-willed determination. Eloquent as he was when speaking of his project itself, he could not express the compulsion of those motives which moved deep inside of him. He might have said that just as Man has always fought for freedom without counting the cost, so has he always fought to progress, to expand, to set out for a new horizon as soon as the old one is crossed.

"I just have to go on, Belle," Buckmaster said. "I've got to."

WITH Buckmaster's relentless driving force behind them, the crew at Unit C, two hundred miles south of the mountain range, whipped everything the jungle had to offer. At Unit B, however, little delays and accidents continued to happen, so that what commenced as a seemingly easy job to beat the generous government one-year limit, narrowed down to a grim race against time.

With one month remaining, Buckmaster in desperation blasted down the beam to Unit B in his famous, battered old Hartz-Cunningham. He sought out Hanssen, took him aside, and gave it to him straight.

"Hanssen, you're Devaux's inside man on this job."

The blond man was wary. "Mr. Devaux gave me the position, yes. He's my

father-in-law, you know. He hasn't complained about my work, has he?"

Buckmaster almost laughed. "Hardly. You've been doing fine from his standpoint, since your primary purpose here is to sabotage the job so I can't meet the deadline."

Hanssen registered amazed indignation, but Buckmaster paid no attention.

"Never mind the heroics," said Buckmaster. "I've known your true mission all along. That's why all the key watchmen and guards are men loyal to me only. But I preferred to have you around because then I'd always know the source of the dirty work. With you fired, if that were possible against Devaux's wishes, I'd never know where the next knife in the back might come from."

Hanssen tried blustering. "I don't have to take this from you!" he yelled.

"Shut up. I'm making you a proposition—just cut out the petty little nuisances and save yourself for one big try at ruining the project. After all, it's to Devaux's advantage if the work is allowed to reach the verge of completion before being stopped cold at the eleventh hour."

Hanssen's jaw dropped and he goggled, utterly flabbergasted. He started to pretend bewildered innocence, gave it up, tried to act tough, then conceded he couldn't make that stick, either. Finally he grinned and shook his head.

"This beats me. I've heard everything now. Okay, Buckmaster. Have it your way."

Forty-eight hours later, back at C Unit, the communications man plunged into Buckmaster's office with a message.

"The factory!" he bawled. "There's been an explosion. Only one man escaped. All the rest were killed. Everything else is ruined!"

IV

Jungle Death

BUCKMASTER'S face was set in such lines of naked fury that the radio man flinched. Devaux had caught him napping. He had hoped to buy a respite with his unsettling suggestion to Hanssen. Instead, the enemy had struck like lightning, and Buckmaster's private war had seemingly backfired to kill his dearest friend.

He grabbed the flimsy. "Where'd this come from?"

"Unit B," answered the operator. "The only survivor made it back to camp just a few minutes ago."

"Was it Fred?"

"No, sir. One of the technicians. He made it in Mr. Carle's ship."

Buckmaster ran for the radio shack, snapped on the private beam from the factory. It beeped steadily. Living quarters at the lab, however, were some distance apart, and might have been untouched by any explosion. He rang them, but there was no answer.

"Any more details?" he rapped at the nervous radio man.

"No, sir. The survivor, whoever it is, collapsed."

Buckmaster slogged through the mud to his ancient Hartz-Cunningham and blasted off at once without even checking his fuel. Straight down the factory's secret beam he rode, over a nightmare of untracked, seething jungle. A twenty-minute dash brought him to the tiny clearing in the midst of nowhere, and he set his rocket down carefully on its slowly fading pillars of flame. Then he stared.

Factory, living quarters, radio shack—everything was untouched, unharmed. Even as he looked, Fred Carle stepped from the lab with an expression of mild surprise and hailed him.

"What's up, John?"

Buckmaster crossed the tiny spaceport. So great was his relief that he could not answer at once. His back, he realized suddenly, was bathed in cold perspiration. He was not quite the unfeeling machine other men believed him to be.

"Dunno, Fred. A message came through that the place had blown up. No one answered when I called by radio,

so I came to find out."

"The radio's in the living quarters, so we can tune in nights for music. No one's around to listen for your call signal except at the hours we specified for getting in touch with each other."

The two technical assistants had trailed out to join Carle.

"Maybe someone wanted to get you away from camp for some reason or other," one of them suggested.

"No." Buckmaster said. "I'm away much of the time, anyhow."

THE answer came with stunning suddenness, with the sputtering thunder of another rocket ship as it nosed swiftly down into the clearing. Buckmaster leaped toward the scientist.

"Guns." he yelled. "Quick! Where d'you keep 'em?"

"Why—er—what?" Flustered, Carle wasted three precious seconds. "In the living room."

"Run for cover!" Buckmaster sprinted like a college boy for the men's quarters, followed by the bewildered but vaguely alarmed technicians. It was too late. Death's pale warning seared hissingly against the door as a proton bolt cut between Buckmaster and safety. Shock, transmitted on the ionized air, whirled him, dazed, to the ground. The entire group came to a quick halt, hands upraised.

From the newly arrived ship, Hanssen stepped out smilingly, carrying a proton rifle with the ease of long practice.

"Now you're showing sense," he observed. Two other gunmen followed him. "Any more of you?"

"No," said Buckmaster, staggering to his feet. "What's the idea?"

"As if you didn't know. We trailed you here with radar after making sure you'd come in answer to our slightly inaccurate message." Hanssen detailed one of his henchmen to poke through the buildings. "I hope Dr. Carle has completed his labors on the thermocouples and the vortex-ring machinery.

Carle's stricken expression was answer enough. Hanssen laughed.

"Now just step into my ship, if you please. My colleagues are going to take you on a little journey. I'm staying here to check the work. If any expert help is still needed, you may be brought back. But if everything is shipshape—" He drew one finger across his throat genially.

Buckmaster clenched his fists in an agony of indecision. Sweat began to run down his nose. His friends, his assistants, Buckmaster himself—all to die because he had underestimated the enemy. Buckmaster had no fear of death, only of the ignominy of dying without a chance to fight. The sole question in his mind was whether to make the break now or later.

Hanssen tipped up the slender "barrel" of his gun.

"Inside!" he ordered, indicating the rocket. "And don't console yourself with the thought that there'll be any delay in winding this thing up, as soon as I've gone over your contraptions here. No boys in blue are going to dash to your rescue."

Buckmaster and the others filed into Hanssen's ship, and their wrists were lashed tightly behind them. There was a pilot waiting for orders, and the two gunmen. Four to three, since Hanssen was staying. At least the enemy force was weakened to that extent.

"Okay," Hanssen said to the pilot. "You know where to go. I'll use Buckmaster's crate."

He slammed the port. At once the ship began to rise shudderingly, blooming on twin stems of fire, then slid into the steaming fog.

Buckmaster's thoughts raced. Should they be taken to some unmapped pinpoint in the jungle, or a remote island, even if they did manage to overpower their captors and escape they would be utterly lost. Their only chance would be to cruise aimlessly about in the fog as long as their fuel lasted, in hopes of miraculously cutting the path of some-

one's radio beam. No, the time to act was right now.

BUCKMASTER lay back on a narrow couch when the guards' eyes were momentarily turned away, and drew his knees up to his chin. Contorting himself in acrobatics amazing for so thick-bodied a man, he pushed his bound wrists down as far as possible, then wriggled his feet and legs over the rope. Having thus brought his hands around to the front of his body, he started to work on the bonds with his teeth. One of the gunman turned.

"Hey!" he cried, started. "Cut that out!"

Instantly the captives plunged into action. The two technicians hurled themselves clumsily at the gunmen, bumping them off-balance in a cursing, scrambling melee. Fred Carle without hesitation plunged awkwardly the length of the rocket and leaped, bound arms and all, upon the pilot's back. The pilot, reacting with amazing swiftness, slid aside and half threw Carle against the instrument panel. There was a blinding stab of electricity as Carle's body shorted out the controls. His back arched in mortal agony and he screamed once, a last, despairing cry which somehow held a faint echo of final triumph.

The ship rolled as if torpedoed, and Buckmaster was thrown drunkenly against the escape hatch. Lightly fastened, the door sprang open under the impact and catapulted Buckmaster cleanly out. His last frantic grasp managed to seize the emergency parachute which regulations insist shall be attached to a static line beside all escape hatches. It was this rule which saved Buckmaster's life. With both hands tied together as they clung to the harness, he could never have pulled a rip-cord himself. But the static line worked perfectly, snapping the chute open just behind the stricken ship.

For a timeless instant Buckmaster seemed suspended in an infinity of clammy grayness, with no sensation of falling, no visibility, just nothingness. Then, fantastically, the dying rocket ship returned, swinging about the descending parachutist in a weird spiral. The extreme port tube switches were jammed in firing position, throwing the rocket into a circular plunge. Spewing lop-sided fire, it nosed around Buckmaster like a shark making up its mind to strike.

Buckmaster kicked and struggled to slip his chute toward the center of that deadly spiral. Each time the rocket blazed past, he shouted at the two lab helpers still trapped within.

"Bail out!" he bellowed. "Bail out!"

Finally the port did open, as the ghostly ship materialized once more on its strange course, and two figures tumbled free. But at that instant a broad, wet leaf slapped Buckmaster's face, and something twitched at the invisible canopy supporting him. He looked down, saw he was but a few feet from the ground. The others had jumped too late. They would smash unsupported into the muck alongside the ship.

As Buckmaster landed there was a terrific explosion barely fifty yards away, and a searing blast of flame so intense that the fog was perceptibly thinned for several minutes. He collapsed his chute hurriedly, chewed his hands free from the cord which had bound them, and made his way to the wreck.

The ship had struck so hard that the impact had split it open like a ripe pod, and fire had gutted it from end to end. So fierce had been that short blaze that there was literally nothing recognizable in the ashes. After waiting for the pyre to cool, Buckmaster poked around for quite some time trying to find anything useful, but he failed even to identify any of the six charred bodies.

Eventually Buckmaster left the wreckage, walked a few steps, then turned to make a queer half-salute. It was mourning and for the only man he had ever called friend.

"I won't forget," he murmured.

HE TOOK stock of his position, found it bad. He was utterly lost in the Venusian jungle without even a compass. He knew he was not far from the factory, but in which direction it lay he had not the faintest idea. So thick were the mists on Venus that not even dawn or sunset could serve a man to orient himself. Light simply came and went in a general diffusion.

Worse still, although he knew the jungle and had explored much of it, outfitted with gun, food, medicines, and compass, now he was practically without equipment in a land where man has nothing but enemies. All he possessed was the inevitable broad-bladed crab knife, tool-of-all-work carried by most jungle veterans, strapped in the thigh-sheath concealed in the left leg of his trousers. None of his recent captors had suspected the presence of that knife.

Buckmaster sat down on a fallen log, blade in hand, and listened to the monotonous drip-drip of the sodden undergrowth. It seemed to mock him. From afar came the enraged hunting shriek of the giant whip, tyrannosaurus-like monster with thirty-foot prehensile tongue. Few men lived after meeting up with a whip.

A land crab scuttled from among some cycads, attracted perhaps by the smoke. Buckmaster cracked it with his heel, then neatly cut it open with his knife. The meat, which amounted to about three mouthfuls, was rubbery and rank-smelling. But it was one of the few bits of edible animal life on the planet. The crab also contained a precious swallow or two of sweetish juice.

Refreshed, Buckmaster began to meditate, reviewing his predicament from all angles, studying and discarding possible lines of action. Finally he made a decision. He rose and began scrutinizing the fallen log on which he had been seated, poking at it with his knife in various spots.

"No dice," he muttered, and circled the wrecked space-ship slowly, searching the jungle for other fallen trees. Twice he found promising ones, attacking them with the knife point, but each time turned away disappointed. But the fourth tree brought different results. It was thoroughly decayed in the center, and Buckmaster disemboweled it with powerful, stabbing strokes. A double handful of gray insects, with two-inch bodies and hammer-shaped heads, spilled free.

Smiling for the first time in many days, Buckmaster set one of the bugs on the ground. At once it began to crawl directly away from him, and nothing—neither plants nor débris nor puddles of water—could make it deviate more than ever so slightly from its line of march. Buckmaster set two more of the insects down. They, to, began their dogged creeping in the same direction.

"Compass-bugs, all right," Buckmaster grunted to himself, scooping them all up and stowing them carefully away in his pockets. "Little sweethearts."

For the compass-bug was cousin to that strange tropical insect on Earth which always moves directly to the north, as if there were a lodestone in its tiny skull. Similar insects had saved many a lost prospector on Venus.

Buckmaster knew well enough that the factory and units B and C formed the points of a rather flat triangle. A line between the two camps would run almost straight north and south, with the factory somewhat to the west and considerably nearer to B unit. More important still, rockets traveling along the beam between the two construction camps stayed close to the ground, and their jet blasts and exhaust gases had indelibly marked the jungle by flame and poison for the eye trained to notice such things. By moving eastward, Buckmaster would inevitably cross that line. If he recognized it, he could then follow it north through a hundred miles of green purgatory, to where Hanssen and his gangsters would await him.

Buckmaster faced east, lined up three enormous tree-ferns. If he should lose his bearings, one of the little compass-

bugs would set him straight again. He contemplated the frightful journey that loomed before him, shivering as he considered the task before him.

Part of the route would traverse high ground, with impenetrable thickets, and lariat-vines trying to ensnare him, and savage life-forms slinking hungrily at his heels. Part of it would be through swamps whose primeval slime sobbed and gurgled hideously, emitting a sickening stench that turned the stomach. Nightmare, vicious things would nose slobberingly through the ooze. Death would come so near and so often that it would lose all meaning. There would be seeming eons of walking, staggering, falling, and getting up again. His mind would become chaos, his body numb with agony.

The old Chinese proverb came to his mind. "A journey of ten thousand miles begins with a single step." He took that step, then another, through the thickly clinging mud that subtly drains the strength from even the sturdiest muscles. . . .

THREE hours later, Buckmaster dropped heavily upon a hummock to catch his breath. He was covered with ooze from head to foot, and voracious clots of molds were working on his supposedly mold-proof clothes. He had flushed two more crabs and found a handful of wild tomberries. Now he sliced off the tops of several barrel ferns and drank the juice.

Rain began to hiss down in fat, dark drops like hot marbles. Buckmaster laved his cheek and hand where inflammation marked the venomous caress of the silk-fang bat. Any kind of gun could keep such minor pests at bay. Without one, a man fought his way barehanded through perpetual siege.

The light was beginning insensibly to fade, but nightfall was still some time away. Though his trial had only begun, fiery aches beginning in Buckmaster's legs and lancing clean up into his head, swelled by the tiny protests of each nerve in between, made movement a torture already. But he figured he could make another few miles before darkness, until its fearsome monsters and unknown terrors of the night, overtook him and drove him to the shelter of the treetops.

All emotions save one had been purged by the grimness of his ordeal. Neither anger, nor fear, nor hate were left to him. In Buckmaster's soul there was but room for a single flame—his unwavering resolve to return and defeat his power-mad partner in their epic struggle for empire. He was conscious only that he had to get back before it was too late. He must hurry—hurry. Devaux's glacial, mocking eyes seemed to lead him, like marsh fires, as he rose to fight further through the jungle.

V

B for Berserk

THE CAMP seethed with rumor and counter-rumor. Work was at a complete standstill. First the news about the factory being destroyed somehow leaked out and set the place in an uproar. Then Hanssen disappeared for hours, and word spread that he had been killed. Finally Hanssen returned in Buckmaster's rocket ship, maintaining a tight-lipped silence, and the men began to wonder why Buckmaster did not show up. Twice in the next two days Hanssen blasted off into the fog, returning without a word to anyone.

"Where's Buckmaster? You'd suppose he'd come around just to keep us on the job, if nothin' else."

"Know what I think? He got blown up along with the factory."

"Bosh! I been figurin' this whole thing out. If you ask me, the whole unit C was wiped out by plague. And that means Sun-Beam's washed up. Finished. We're saps to stick around here any longer. I'm gettin' the next ship out of here."

The third day another element was

injected into the turbulent situation, a tall, slender stranger who arrived in a sumptuous space yacht. At first the gray-haired man in his immaculate whites, who looked so much like an animate icicle, and who produced a similar feeling of chill down the spine when he looked at anyone, was thought to be a government bureau chief. But soon he was recognized.

"I seen his picture, I tell yuh. That's Ichabod Devaux, the multi-millionaire. Regular financial rattlesnake."

"Says you. Anyhow, whichever he is, he wouldn't come around if Buckmaster was still boss. That proves Buckmaster's through. He's tossed in his hand and beat it back to Earth, that's what I believe. Licked."

"So what happens to us? Who brings us supplies, or who takes us home if we want to go?" Thus fear and uncertainty were added to the turmoil.

At that very moment, Ichabod Devaux and Loren Hanssen were conferring in the company offices. Hanssen was grinning complacently.

"I've really been doing a job here. You arrived at the psychological moment."

"I made my first ten million by seizing psychological moments." Devaux's tongue was acid as ever. "Bring me up to date without too much bragging, please."

Hanssen quickly told of his ruse to trap Buckmaster into revealing the location of the laboratory, and of the subsequent fatal accident.

"I heard the crash and found the wreck a couple hours later with radar. Six corpses, no sign of the seventh man."

"Buckmaster?"

"Personally, I think they got tired of scaring Earth with Flying Saucers, and decided to try something different!"

Hanssen shrugged. "The bodies were burned beyond identification. The chances are six to one against Buckmaster being the survivor. But even so, whoever it is, he's doomed. He's lost in the jungle without food or instruments, probably without weapons, a hundred miles from here."

"But too near the factory."

Hanssen snorted. "Believe me, it's a physical impossibility for a human being to orient himself or find a specific spot in the Venusian jungle without instrument or radio help. The odds would be a thousand to one against the man ever

finding the factory. Besides, I've been back there twice myself, just in case. I'm the only man alive who knows where it is."

DEVAUX frowned thoughtfully. "If the evidence never comes to light, perhaps it will be for the best. But I never intended that anyone should be killed. Too risky. My hand must never appear in this thing at any stage, else the Government would never allow me to head the subsequent company—the company which will pick up the pieces here when the time comes. What about Carle's inventions?"

"All complete. Thermocouples and armature were easy to test. There's some other apparatus, six contraptions obviously the vortex-ring generators. I don't understand their workings—it would take a regular super-scientist for that. And there was no power to try 'em out. But they look finished. I've left them at the factory, and left the factory's directional beam going, of course. We can pick up the stuff any time."

Devaux nodded. "Well done. However, we better play our hand with the remote possibility of Buckmaster's return—alive—in view. We must have the project damaged just sufficiently so that, even if he does return, he'll be unable to repair it in time to beat the deadline. Yet no one must suspect that we had anything to do with it!"

Hanssen interrupted eagerly. "Exactly the way I figured. I haven't told the men a thing. The silent treatment, you know. But I have three or four stooges circling around spreading all sorts of phoney rumors. No one knows what to believe. The key spots are still controlled by men loyal to Buckmaster, what few there are left. But the minute you say the word, we can coalesce all the vague worries and resentments into a fury that might level the construction work right down to the ground if we're not careful to keep it within bounds. That means you'll never need to appear at all. The situation is like a bulging, rotten fruit. One prick of the needle will bust it wide open!" He gestured with his fist.

Devaux's pale eyes widened as he stared at his son-in-law.

"Well! That's remarkable, my boy. I believe I've under-estimated your abilities. You've outdone yourself, really."

Hanssen strutted, grinning. "This is called unit B. It's where we'll win a victory."

For another twenty-four hours the crisis was allowed to ripen, as Hanssen's stooges deftly brought the pot of hate to boil. Embittered arguments flared, fights broke out. Finally a delegation of the workers called upon Hanssen and demanded to know the truth about how they stood.

Hanssen surveyed the men with a swelling sense of power. This was his moment. If he acted his role well, as he told his great falsehood, the whole plot would culminate in a complete triumph for Ichabod Devaux.

"I guess you might as well know the worst," he began with an air of resignation. "I haven't said anything before because I was trying to carry on alone, so that all we've achieved wouldn't be wasted. But it's no use. Buckmaster kept too many details in his head. Without him I'm helpless. Buckmaster's pulled up stakes and left. He's gone."

There was a stunned silence. Then, "He's walked out on us? Why?"

"I suppose he realized he couldn't beat the government deadline—and quit."

There was subtlety in this. Buckmaster dead would be mourned as a martyred leader, but Buckmaster fleeing in the face of defeat would be despised. Hanssen had a bad moment when he contemplated his position should Buckmaster turn up alive. However, it was a crisis. He had to take a chance just this once.

"The rat!" A Devaux stooge sounded off. "After we've sweat an' bled and died here by the hundreds! All that goes for nothing, eh?"

Hanssen shrugged, portraying the

strong, embittered man betrayed.

"Providence sometimes has a way, boys, of wreaking its proper retribution on power-crazed, selfish men like Buckmaster," he said.

The false note rang rather sourly in the gathering dusk, but it went unnoticed as another man quickly took his cue.

"Well, I don't know about you fellers, but I, for one, don't intend to leave the job standin' there untouched as a monument to a yellow dog!"

This, too, had a rehearsed air. But hysteria suddenly seized the mob and spread like wildfire, and they streamed in a yelling frenzy up the hill toward the tower and the pits. Night fell, like the dropping of a shroud, and automatically the orange, insect-repellant lights flickered on.

IT WAS a scene straight from hell. Heat, dank and stifling. The dull clank of a pump. The eternal effluvium of decay, the smell of machine oil. Slickly sweating faces unhuman in the weird glow, with hot, glittering eyes alive with the unholy lust to destroy.

"Nitro!" rose the cry, and the river of men veered toward the explosives shack. The guards were men who had finished their six months' contract and who, with their future dependent upon Buckmaster's success, were loyal to him. But they didn't have a chance against such overwhelming odds. A gun flashed, someone shrieked, and then the entire hut collapsed under the rush. Like locusts the rioters plundered it, then poured onto the knoll.

A staunch little group of loyal miners and planters, to whom completion of the beamline meant everything, rallied by Belle Courtney tried to stop the avalanche.

"Stop, you fools!" she screamed, trying to reason with them. "Listen to me!"

It was hopless. The wreckers advanced with the inexorability of madmen. Guns were drawn, and for one ugly moment it appeared bloody slaughter would break loose.

But with exquisite timing one of the ringleaders led the men sharply aside, heading for the nearest of the bell-shaped pits intended to house the vortex-ring machinery.

"My brother died when this thing caved in last month!" a girl from Belle's place shouted. "Blast the hell hole to pieces."

Explosives were hurled in, and the rebels surged back. Flame and thunder spouted in the dimness. The earth trembled, rocking the nearby tower. The lights swayed wildly, and fantastic shadows wheeled and bobbed like phantom fighters in the night. Mud and shattered concrete sprayed wildly up the hill.

With a fierce yell of exultation, the crowd raced on about the great circle of craters, pausing only to dump the nitro in and then fleeing to the next pit while flaming red destruction roared behind them.

Then it was done, and the six mighty pits which had cost so much in blood and treasure were collapsed in ruins. Gathering their breath, the rioters eyed the giant tower which speared up far beyond the limits of visibility. Teeth flashed as they moved to the assault. But at that precise instant, as if the cosmos itself were fascinated by the drama being enacted by these hundred insignificant lumps of tormented matter, the mists of Venus shuddered and thinned, drawing back almost like a curtain.

At the edge of the clearing stood a lone figure, ragged, filthy, and hollow-eyed, barely visible in the inadequate light. Silence came like the stroke of a knife, and even the jungle seemingly held its breath. A single curse rose into the stifling air, echoed there interminably.

A rioter emitted a hoarse, startled shout.

"It's him. It's John Buckmaster boys, alive and kicking!"

VI

Man Against the Cosmos

FEAR and hate awaited John Buckmaster as he stepped from the jungle. He saw it in the buttery faces, the insanely watchful eyes, the air of crafty triumph. That hate was almost a tangible thing, that fear a wall, a living pressure that sought to contain him in the world of the dead whence he had returned.

But Buckmaster gathered his strength and began to walk toward that mob of men, past the shattered ruins of his dream with the squelching sound of his boots distinct in the stillness. The members of the mob wavered, braced themselves and tried to stare him down, but fell aside as he marched through them and down to where Loren Hanssen stood waiting. The two big men looked at each other wordlessly for long moments. Finally Buckmaster spoke.

"Hanssen, you are an accessory before and after the fact of the abduction and murder of Fred Carle and his two lab assistants. You didn't quite have the nerve to do your own dirty work, but here's one fight you won't dodge."

Buckmaster struck, with all the pent-up grief and fury that had simmered within him during the past four days of torture. Hanssen staggered back, reeling, his face red ruin as a smashed nose spouted blood.

He came back weaving, fighting with courage and skill, and he was fast for so heavy a man. He moved around lightly, jabbing and hooking with a capable left hand. Once he caught Buckmaster skidding awkwardly in the uncertain footing and clubbed home a right across the temple, knocking his man to his knees in the mud.

But he had nothing to match the righteous flame that animated Buckmaster, who walked in slinging his fists as if they were iron weights. When they landed, the sound was that of an ax on a side of beef. Hanssen's lips burst like mashed grapes. His brows sprouted blue lumps that half-closed his eyes. Several gasp-drawing body blows made him shiver like a stricken oak. Those blows were terrible. They took the spring from his legs, and soon Hanssen was no longer the dancing master. He was forced to exchange punch for punch, with the increasingly horrid feeling that his own punches were bouncing off an impervious mask.

The end was inevitable. In less than five minutes of brutal slugging, Hanssen was reduced to a shapeless lump of bruised and bleeding flesh, unconscious in the slime. Buckmaster stepped back to draw a long, shuddering breath, and peered around the circle of spectators.

THERE were no visible signs of opposition in the workers now. They were a tough crew, quick-tempered, rowdy, even criminal, but no man there had ever witnessed such concentrated savagery as that which had smashed down Loren Hanssen. They drew back, awed and silent.

"Scum!" Buckmaster lashed at them with words of searing scorn. "Sniveling brats, busting up the toys when you think you can't play any more! To think that scourings such as you must be depended upon to bring forth into being the vision of this new world that was conceived by my brain!" He spat his contempt.

"Next time you hear I'm washed up, don't be in such a hurry to believe it. Because nothing—nothing is going to stop John Buckmaster from completing what he started out to do. If any of you have lost your spines, you can get your time and take the next rocket out of here. But remember—tonight Buckmaster will be the paymaster!"

It was big talk, blunt and compelling. A restless mutter rippled over the listeners, but no one moved to take up Buckmaster's offer. An indefinable change had come over them. There were sheepish grins, shamed head shakings. The Boss was back, and he was still the Boss.

Sensing this, Buckmaster turned and cleared his raw, aching throat.

"Devaux!" he cried out. "Ichabod Devaux, I know you're somewhere near! Come out!"

The crowd surged, parted briefly to allow the slender, white-suited Devaux to enter the churned-up, muddy arena. The financier was as cooly unruffled as if he had just left his valet. Tension began to build up again as he and Buckmaster faced each other expressionlessly, like two poker experts playing for gigantic stakes.

Devaux showed his ace first. "Congratulations, partner, on having handled an awkward situation," he said in amused and faintly superior tones. "Unfortunately your dramatic return was a bit too late. The men, laboring under a regrettable misunderstanding, have so badly damaged the project that you'll never be able to finish it in time to meet the government deadline. Only a half month left, you know."

Buckmaster nodded. "Something in what you say, all right. The pits are ruined. On the other hand, you, as well as Hanssen are an accessory to the kidnapping and murder charges. You're not on Earth, remember. Your money and influence are worthless here. You would be tried in a Venusian court presided over by a World League Superior Justice beyond your power to touch."

"Mmm," Devaux seemed unperturbed. "On what evidence? I have been quite careful not to involve myself in this affair. Even your own workmen will admit I had nothing to do with what has happened."

"Hanssen's testimony will be quite sufficient. If you don't think he'll testify against you, just look at him!"

They regarded the Swede, who was sitting up dazedly in the mud, listening to the conversation. He flinched at Buckmaster's mere glance.

DEVAUX had never seen a more thoroughly whipped man. He smiled coldly and nodded. Having accepted the obvious truth, his agile brain raced far ahead.

"Yes, I see your point. He's not my servant any more. He's yours. So it's a stalemate. We each, in a sense, defeat the other. In which case I have a proposition to make."

"Make it."

"A truce. My intention, of course, was to finance a new corporation under my own name to buy in the incompleted project and recoup, many fold, on the past year's investment. I'll still do so, but with you retaining your fifty per cent. Just as we started, co-owners. In exchange, you forget the criminal charges. That way, we both come out ahead. Any other way, we both lose. I think you must agree that's a reasonable offer."

"Very. But it's based on one rather shaky premise. You think I'm stopped here. But I'm not."

Devaux's disdainful eyebrows began to rise. "You believe you can repair those pits in two weeks? I'm disappointed in you, Mr. Buckmaster. That is rank nonsense."

"I've no intention of repairing the pits now. I have no need of them, never did need them. They were dug so as to lull any suspicions you might have entertained about the authenticity of my so-called vortex-ring machinery. That was strictly romance on my part. The most powerful vortex rings in the System couldn't begin to clear away the four-mile thickness of clouds on this planet. I tricked you, Devaux, with an elaborate pretense about the importance of the vortex-ring installation, so that when you and Hanssen struck, it would be at the pits."

Devaux took a step back, and something changed in his face as this depth bomb went off within him. A murmur of wonderment ran round the circle of listeners.

"But—what about the fog," the financier said. "You've got to clear it somehow."

"Sure. Another Carle-Buckmaster in-

vention. Gigantic X-rays, not quite X-rays as you know them, perhaps. Six huge machines. When those super-rays are turned upon the mists, the moisture will be condensed and precipitated out to the extent of the penetration, which will be well beyond the cloud limit. Thus, a hole to the sunlight—just as simple as that."

"Then—this vortex ring business, and the pits—all a colossal bluff?"

"Precisely. Oh, I'll want the pits eventually as housings for the ray projectors, but they're not immediately necessary. We can set up on the open ground for the present."

Devaux's armor cracked a bit. "With my own money you cheat me!" he shouted.

Buckmaster grinned, for the first time in many days. "Yeah. Ironic, isn't it?"

Devaux snarled, animal-fashion. "You haven't succeeded yet. There's no opening in the mist. You haven't made the beam-car trial run, and until you do you've failed to meet the government's specifications."

"Tut, tut, Devaux, don't be impatient. All in due time." Buckmaster looked up at the crowd, raised his voice. "You men! Back on the job! Never mind the last few yards that were to have been added to the tower. I want the beam receiver installed up there as is. Tomorrow morning I'm calling Mt. Apollo to shoot the beam down. Now get busy."

The workers dispersed without a word, streaming back to their jobs. Buckmaster called unit C on the handy-talky, explained the situation briefly to a trusted subordinate, reassured him. Then he looked at Hanssen.

"You! Take my Hartz-Cunningham and go back to Carle's lab. Get the X-ray projectors. Bring them here at once."

Someone put a protesting hand on Buckmaster's arm. It was Belle Courtney, with her heart shining in her eyes.

"John, you've done wonderfully well," she said. "Please be careful. Don't make any mistakes at this stage."

"There's no need to worry about trusting Hanssen. He'll do exactly as I tell him. Won't you, Hanssen?" He handled the fellow with his eyes.

Hanssen wiped his face. "Yes, sir," he replied, and walked off as if hypnotized, without a look at his father-in-law.

"As for you, Belle, you can do me a favor. Detail some loyal men to make sure that our distinguished guest here doesn't try to sneak off in that space yacht of his. Then give me a place to rest and don't wake me till dawn. I've got to sleep."

"Yes, John." Belle fell into step as Buckmaster headed for Honky-tonk-on-Jets. As they parted before the door of a room which was being prepared for him with cot and blankets, she opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind. Instead, she cuffed him man-fashion across the biceps.

"You know, John, you're pretty terrific. In a colossal sort of way."

Buckmaster smiled at her. "Glad you think so, Belle."

DAYBREAK appeared, and with it came the cessation of the night's labors. Exhausted, the men flung themselves down on packing crates or tool chests or even in the mud for precious rest. But if his life had depended on it, not a man there could have forced himself to leave that magic hilltop on the day of all days.

The last week, with its alarms and excitements, had built up a tremendous feeling of tension. Just to breathe was to feel the tingling tightness that gripped everyone in its spell. Now the drama was being played out to its last act, with even the struggle between Titans being capped as John Buckmaster hurled his strength and his mind against the insensate powers of nature.

The workers had set the stage with a final burst of pre-dawn energy. Now they lay back to watch history in the making.

Buckmaster, bathed and breakfasted and refreshed, stepped from Honky-

tonk-on-Jets and took in the scene. Ichabod Devaux stood quietly some distance away, stiff as a ramrod, almost as if he had not moved throughout the night. Hanssen, too, was nearby. He shambled up to Buckmaster like a faithful dog not quite sure whether he'll get a bone or a kick from his master.

"I—I followed your orders, sir. The X-ray stuff is all here. Also the big cable. In your ship."

"Good. Set the six machines up in a circle roughly corresponding to the circle of pits. Then send someone up on the hydraulic to attach the heavy cable to the receiver."

"Right." Hanssen began to call orders, and operations proceeded smoothly. Three men piled onto the lift and fastened one end of the seemingly endless black cable to the platform, then shot up into the murk alongside the tower. Snake-like the cable uncoiled in pursuit.

A small stream of men wrestled the ray projectors into position so that their rays would describe a perfect, straight-walled cylinder through the fog, aimed at the mathematically calculated position of the sun. From a distance they resembled a battery of tremendous searchlights. But when one peered inside, their close resemblance to the conventional X-ray—on a huge scale—was unmistakable.

Another hour passed while cable connections were made, final adjustments checked. Then Buckmaster, estimating that the sun had risen sufficiently high, turned to Devaux.

"Well, we're about ready to move into action," said Buckmaster. "We'll know the answers to a lot of questions pretty soon. Maybe good, maybe bad. Exciting, isn't it?" They smiled at each other without mirth.

Buckmaster called Mt. Apollo on the handy-talky, dictated revised figures on the height of the tower, and told them to switch on the power beam as soon as possible. Apollo replied that the weather was clear, had been so all morning, atop the mountain, and that all was ready for the final test.

Minutes loaded with suspense followed. Then the beam came hissing invisibly through the mists to register a perfect bull's eye, on the receiver. The contact made with a crash that shivered the metal spire to its foundations, and a blinding blob of pure energy splattered like fireworks out of the clouds, fell smoking and sizzling into the mud.

"Power," observed Buckmaster. "Sheer power. In quantities almost beyond the ability of the ordinary mind to grasp."

Quickly now the tempo increased, as Buckmaster briefly tested each projector. All was well. After clearing the mighty circle of all persons, he closed the master switch.

SILENTLY, the weapons of Man's ingenuity thrust their unseen challenge against the hitherto immutable and unconquerable shape of Nature itself. At first there was no change. Then, ever so faintly, a drizzle began to drift casually down.

The drizzle thickened to a light rainfall, and quite suddenly the clouds recoiled, as if a living thing had felt the thrust of a knife. They swirled sluggishly, seeking to repel or evade the force that disintegrated them. In vain. Harder came the rain, pattering steadily, and the form of a tube-shaped opening began to come uncannily into being. Up and up rose the circular aperture, till the entire tower stood completely revealed. Still further the fog retreated under the unceasing hammering of the rays.

The planet fought back with primitive savagery, marshaling its powers to smash contemptuously at Man's puny science which dared offer challenge to its supremacy. A torrent of water began to pour from the cleared-out cylinder in the mist. Ditches had been designed to drain off this rainwater, but they quickly filled and began to overflow their banks. The torrent became

a flood, scattering the workers like flushed quail, chasing them to shelter in Honky-tonk-on-Jets or the barracks or in tall trees, whence they watched the progress of the battle.

The water rose to such heights that it threatened to inundate the projectors. One of them actually did short out with a sharp splutter and a wisp of smoke, and the others were saved only after a bitter skirmish with sandbags and shovels. Lightning crackled with stunning violence, adding new hazard to the tumult, striking at the tower repeatedly with such fury that it shivered and changed color and gave off an eerie discharge.

But amid everything John Buckmaster floundered through flood and storm checking and adjusting his apparatus, waging his war with the unimpassioned relentlessness of Juggernaut. Ever and ever upward he thrust his invisible piston against the unwilling vapors.

The end came, after hours of strife, with startling suddenness. One moment all the world seemed dissolved in storm and thunder and the rush of waters. The next, the last wisp of cloud four miles up had dissolved, and a shaft of blinding sunlight poured down the vertical tunnel to bite searingly into the sodden earth.

Instantaneously a great cloud of vapor blossomed upward, only to be quickly changed into steam by the rays. A wave of well-nigh unendurable heat blasted out for a short distance, forcing even Buckmaster away from the hill. More steam arose, in progressively lesser puffs, to be dispersed, and in an amazingly short period all the ground within reach of the sun's fierce light was baked hard and dry.

SLOWLY, by twos and threes, like bemused night creatures drawn irresistibly to the mighty blazing sword of sunlight which stabbed into the virgin soil to cleanse and sterilize its rottenness, the workmen gathered round. They stared upward into that unbelievable tube of brilliance. Its western arc, as the clock-work device to which each projector was attached pushed it imperceptibly along the sun's path, dripped like a leaky pipe. Once a momentary breeze stirred the mists and a brief shower of golden rain pattered down.

Realization of the mighty truth dawned upon them. For the first time since the beginning of Creation itself, the light of the sun was touching the surface of Venus. The dynamic vision of one man alone was responsible.

A cabaret girl, her body in silhouette, stood shielding her eyes from the brilliance.

"By the seven stars," she said in awed tones. "He's really done it."

A ragged cheer went up, reluctant at first, then suddenly full-throated and sincere—a mighty shout of triumph. The men rushed to where the battered and mudstained Buckmaster stood waiting and hoisted him to their shoulders. A wild victory march ensued, clear around the circle of ray projectors, laughing, yelling, clumsily dancing in the mud with Belle Courtney and her cabaret girls, improvising verses for the ribald tune that was to immortalize this moment in song. It was a reaction of sheer joy to the violence of the night before.

Spent, the celebrants finally released the grinning Buckmaster at the entrance of Honky-tonk-on-Jets. Ichabod Devaux awaited him there.

"Well, partner, I'm afraid this is where our trails divide." Buckmaster drew out his wallet, extracted a much-creased sheet of paper. "This is a little mussy, but after all I've been carrying it around almost a year. It's quite legal—a transferral of all right and title to your share in Sun-Beam, Inc. Or, rather, your control of the dummy holding company whose officers—your pals—have been technically my partners. All it requires is your signature. And oh, yes. Don't console yourself with the thought that I'm in any financial hole.

A successful demonstration will bring bankers fighting for the privilege to invest."

Devaux looked around almost sightlessly. "You—you haven't yet made a trial run of the beam-car."

Buckmaster grimaced. "I'm disappointed in you. Twenty-four hours will see the thermocouples in place and the relayed beam shooting to unit C. The armature can be fastened to any old rocket ship, ready to go through the trial run as soon as the government inspector gets here. And he's on his way now. You can't hope for any slip-up there. It's just a formality."

Devaux passed a hand trembling over his face, and his voice was halting, uncertain.

"Yes, yes, of course," he said. "A formality. That's true."

"Perhaps the situation is not quite clear. You have two alternatives—sign over the company or go to prison for what would probably be the rest of your life."

Devaux rallied himself then, with a faint trace of his old acerbity. "There is no need, young man, to explain fundamentals to me. I can take a licking like a man. I know when to concede a six-inch putt. Give me that paper."

Spreading the document on his knee, Ichabod Devaux scrawled his signature thereon, returned it to Buckmaster. Then he turned and walked slowly toward his ship. His clothes were shapeless, sagging, as if something inside the man had been broken.

John Buckmaster wasted no pity on that grasping old man. Devaux had his freedom and most of his wealth—a good bargain. Venus under his economic tyranny would have groaned and withered. It was good that he was now out of the picture.

Instead, Buckmaster looked musingly at that history-making paper for a long time. He thought about Fred Carle, who was not there to share in the triumph he had helped so greatly to achieve. He thought of Belle Courtney, a staunch partner for any man. Then he pushed these thoughts reluctantly aside.

There is neither time nor room for sentiment when a man is overlord of an entire world, and the blood of empire courses his veins.

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VII

Other Worlds to Conquer

John was a man driven by his belief that the world was a savage thing to be fought and conquered, and that his mission in life was to lead that battle. His nature was defiant—a man born to resist and be alone. Yet this quality which made him great crowded all gentleness out of him and made impossible the deep friendships a man needs. He could have had the devotion of any number of

women—yes, including mine—but it was not in him to share.

He aged rapidly those last few years. The joy of battle was gone, and his horizons closed slowly down. For all that he was a millionaire many times over, benevolent master of a planet and over a million human beings, he was really nothing more than a lonely old man. . . .

Unpublished Diary—Belle Courtney.

WERE this fiction, the story of John Buckmaster could end now, with him retiring to live happily ever after. But life seldom comes to so neatly dramatic a period.

Instead, Buckmaster went on to complete the project and made all of his dreams come true. Mines, industries, plantations sprang into being along the transcontinental pattern of the beamline. Small cities, completely enclosed in a special glass which filtered out the harmfulness of the sunlight, blossomed near each relay tower. Surrounded by batteries of improved X-ray projectors, residents saw the thick heavens above them open and close morning and night like so many colossal, weeping eyes. Health and prosperity and law and happiness were the gifts of Sun-Beam, Inc. to the colonists.

Buckmaster himself achieved what few men ever experienced—saw his name honored within his own lifetime. The sculptor Maevsky cast a gigantic bronze statue of Buckmaster in a symbolic resemblance to Prometheus bringing the sun's fire to Venus, and the original was fittingly erected upon the topmost point of Mt. Apollo.

Buckmaster also was the focus of a literary tempest, set off when some young self-styled historian debunked him completely as a cruel robber baron and a despot. Others rushed to his defense, hailing him as the greatest of all pioneers. He was either beloved or hated—there was no middle ground. He even became the object of a senatorial investigation.

But amid all of the furor Buckmaster remained unmoved. He had indeed come upon the winter of his discontent. After a time the excitement of managing his empire of marvels palled. He was no glorified bookkeeper to sit in a sumptuous counting-house calculating his fabulous income. He was born for action, to fight.

Then one day John Buckmaster vanished.

IT WAS just that simple. He went to bed one night as usual, and the next morning his servants found he was gone. There was no farewell note, no signs of struggle, no clue to an utter mystery.

The disappearance created a terrific sensation on both Venus and Earth. The ether burned with news stories and official communications. High authorities dashed about like rabbits.

When he felt restless, police learned that Buckmaster often left home at night for hours at a time, without saying where he was going. The dates of these journeys were noted. Then someone reported that the famous old Hartz-Cunningham, long ago retired as obsolescent, had vanished from the annex to the Pioneer Days Museum where it had been enshrined. Finally, a smart reporter recalled that at irregular intervals, in Buckmaster's home city, the ray projectors had been turned on at night for no discernible reason, and these nights coincided with those of Buckmaster's roamings.

An astronomer might have added these things up into the right answer. Officialdom, however, made no progress till they were on the verge of tearing apart Venus' cities one by one in a search for kidnapers or murderers. This announcement on the telefilm brought a message from Belle Courtney, an invitation to come to her place and learn the truth about Buckmaster's disappearance.

Eyebrows raised at this. Belle Courtney was almost as legendary and revered a figure as John Buckmaster. She

still ran a night club—the most exotic and luxurious on the planet—and it was still known as Belle's. A bit more refined, quite a bit more expensive, Belle still dealt in the three G's of the entertainment world—girl shows, gambling, and good liquor.

The Venusian High Commissioner himself headed the party that answered that invitation. Belle Courtney, white-haired and queenly, met them in her office and came quickly to the point.

"Gentlemen, I would have spoken sooner except for a promise to John not to say anything until he had time to pass Earth's orbit."

"Earth's orbit!" said an investigator. "You mean he's left Venus?"

Babble broke out as comprehension dawned. "Not in that old wreck of a Hartz-Cunningham, surely!" protested another.

"But why past the Earth? Where else can he go?"

"I can't understand the reason for making such a mystery of it."

BELLE COURTNEY waited for the clamor to die away. "John wanted to take this trip alone. He knew that if he announced his intention beforehand, or let anyone know of his whereabouts before he got beyond all possibility of interception, nosey officialdom would kick up a fuss and try to stop him. Those were his words. It's difficult for a man as important as he is to drop everything and leave. The only way to do it is quietly, secretly."

"But where's he going?" asked the High Commissioner.

"I'll show you, gentlemen." Belle pressed a button that slid aside the ceiling to reveal only the glass dome of the city above. It was raining lightly. "John left me authority to request the projectors turned on at my pleasure. The mist should be cleared shortly. You see, this is where John came on those nights when he couldn't stand the boredom of his home. He spent those nights right here, in my office."

The High Commissioner turned pink. "Were you and Mr. Buckmaster—ah—"

The woman smiled. "No. To my everlasting regret, no. John had a far greater love than that. He was too big a man for one woman to hold. This is what he wanted." She pointed upward. "He sat for hours here just looking at what you see there, yearningly."

The tunnel through the clouds was complete, and four tiny stars twinkled miraculously. One of them was ever so faintly reddish in color.

It was the planet Mars.

GRAVITY AND SPORTS RECORDS

SCIENCE fiction writers have often explored the effect of differing gravities on sport, and the usual idea is to show what it would be like to play football or baseball under a much lighter gravity than that on earth. A football team from Earth, for instance, should be able to bowl over any two teams of Martians, because of the difference in gravity.

However, it's entirely possible we have conditions right here on earth which would make a difference in sporting records. The pull of gravity is measurably less at the equator than at either of the poles. An athlete who weighs 200 pounds at the North Pole would weigh only 199 pounds at the Equator, and a shot weighing 16 pounds at the North Pole would weigh 15.92 pounds at the Equator—1.28 ounces less. The reason, of course, is that centrifugal force at the Equator is stronger.

In a slightly weaker gravity, an athlete should be able to jump a bit farther, to add a couple of inches to his best effort with the shotput or discus, and to run a little faster.

Whether or not the theory holds true in practice should become clear in 1956, when the Olympic games are held in Melbourne, Australia. This site is about 22 degrees in latitude closer to the equator than is Helsinki, where the 1952 games were held. ***—M. L. Rosenburg***

Pygmalion's Spectacles

By STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

He put on the glasses, and fell in love with a dream. . . .

"BUT what is reality?" asked the gnomelike man. He gestured at the tall banks of buildings that loomed around Central Park, with their countless windows glowing like the cave fires of a city of Cro-Magnon people. "All is dream, all is illusion; I am your vision, as you are mine."

Illustration by
VIRGIL FINLAY

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Illustration by
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Dan Burke, struggling for clarity of thought through the fumes of liquor, stared without comprehension at the tiny figure of his companion. He began to regret the impulse that had driven him to leave the party to seek fresh air in the park. But he had needed escape; this was one party too many.

"You drink," said the elfin, bearded face, "to make real a dream. Is it not so? You drink to escape reality, and the irony is that even reality is a dream."

Cracked! thought Dan.

"Or so," concluded the other, "says the philosopher Berkeley."

"Berkeley?" echoed Dan. His head was clearing; memories of a sophomore course in elementary philosophy drifted back. "Bishop Berkely, eh?"

"You know him, then? The philosopher of idealism—the one who argues that we do not see, feel, hear, taste the object, but that we have only the sensation of seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting."

"I—sort of recall it."

"Hah! But sensations are mental phenomena. They exist in our minds." He waved again at the light-flecked buildings. "You do not see that wall of masonry; you perceive only a sensation, a feeling of sight. The rest you interpret."

"You see the same thing," retorted Dan.

"How do you know I do? Even if you knew that what I call red would not be green if you could see through my eyes—even if you knew that, how do you know that I too am not a dream of yours?"

Dan laughed. "Of course nobody knows anything. You just get what information you can through the windows of your five senses, and then make your guesses. When you're wrong, you pay the penalty." His mind was clear now save for a mild headache. "Listen," he said suddenly. "You can argue a real thing away to an illusion; that's easy. But if your friend Berkeley is right, why can't you take a dream and make it real? If it works one way, it must work the other."

The beard waggled; elf-bright eyes glittered queerly at him. "All artists do that," said the old man softly. Dan felt that something more quivered on the verge of utterance.

"That's an evasion," he grunted. "Anybody can tell the difference between a picture and the real thing, or between a movie and life."

"But," whispered the other, "the realer the better, no? And if one could make a—a movie—very real indeed, what would you say then?"

"Nobody can, though."

The eyes glittered strangely again. "I can!" he whispered. "I did!"

"Did what?"

"Made real a dream." The voice turned angry. "Fools! I bring it here to sell to Westman, the camera people, and what do they say? 'It isn't clear. Only one person can use it at a time. It's too expensive.' Fools! Fools!"

"Huh?"

"Listen! I'm Albert Ludwig—Professor Ludwig." As Dan was silent, he continued, "It means nothing to you, eh? But listen—a movie that gives one sight and sound. Suppose now I add taste, smell, even touch, if your interest is taken by the story. Suppose I make it so that you are in the story, you speak to the shadows, and the shadows reply, and instead of being on a screen, the story is all about you, and you are in it. Would that be to make real a dream?"

"How the devil could you do that?"

"How? How? But simply! First my liquid positive, then my magic spectacles. I photograph the story in a liquid with light-sensitive chromates. I build up a complex solution—do you see? I add taste chemically and sound electrically. And when the story is recorded, then I put the solution in my spectacles —my movie projector. I electrolyze the solution, break it down; the older chromates go first, and out comes the story, sight, sound, smell, taste—all!"

"Touch?"

"If your interest is taken, your mind supplies that." Eagerness crept into his voice. "You will look at it, Mr.—?"

"Burke," said Dan. *A swindle!* he thought. Then a spark of recklessness glowed out of the vanishing fumes of alcohol. "Why not?" he said.

HE ROSE. Ludwig, standing, came scarcely to his shoulder. A queer, gnomelike old man, Dan thought, as he followed him across the park and into one of the scores of apartment hotels in the vicinity.

In his room Ludwig fumbled in a bag, producing a device vaguely reminiscent of a gas mask with goggles and a rubber mouthpiece. Dan examined it curiously, while the little bearded professor brandished a bottle of water liquid.

"Here it is!" he gloated. "My liquid positive, the story. Hard photography, infernally hard, therefore the simplest possible story. A Utopia—just two characters and you, the audience. Now, put the spectacles on. Put them on and tell me what fools the Westman people are!"

He poured some of the liquid into the mask, and trailed a twisted wire to a device on the table. "A rectifier," he explained. "For the electrolysis."

"Must you use all the liquid?" asked Dan. "If you use part, do you see only part of the story? And which part?"

"Every drop has all of it, but you must fill the eye-pieces." Then as Dan slipped the device gingerly on, "So! Now what do you see?"

"Not a damn thing. Just the window and the lights across the street."

"Of course. But now I start the electrolysis. Now!"

There was a moment of chaos. The liquid before Dan's eyes clouded suddenly white, and formless sounds buzzed. He moved to tear the device from his head, but emerging forms in the mistiness caught his interest.

THE scene steadied; the whiteness was dissipating like mist in summer. Unbelieving, still gripping the arms of that unseen chair, he was staring at a forest. Incredible, unearthly, beautiful! Smooth boles rose inconceivably toward a brightening sky, trees bizarre as the forests of the Carboniferous age. Infinitely overhead swayed misty fronds, and the verdure showed brown and green in the heights. And there were birds—at least curiously lovely pipings and twitterings were all about him, though he saw no creatures—thin elfin whistlings like fairy bugles sounded softly.

He sat frozen, entranced. A louder fragment of melody drifted down to him, mounting in exquisite, ecstatic bursts, now clear as sounding metal, now soft as remembered music. For a moment he forgot the chair whose arms he gripped, the miserable hotel room. He imagined himself solitary in the midst of that lovely glade. "Eden!" he muttered, and the swelling music of unseen voices answered.

Some measure of reason returned. "Illusion!" he told himself. Clever optical devices, not reality. He groped for the chair's arm, found it, and clung to it; he scraped his feet and found again an inconsistency. To his eyes the ground was mossy verdure; to his touch it was merely a thin hotel carpet.

The elfin buglings sounded gently. A faint, deliciously sweet perfume breathed against him. He began to want to believe that all this was no illusion, that it was true.

And then, far through the softening mists, he caught a movement that was not the swaying of verdure, a shimmer of silver more solid than mist. Something approached. He watched the figure as it moved, now visible, now hidden by trees. Very soon he saw that it was human, but it was almost upon him before he realized it was a girl.

SHE wore a robe of silvery, half-translucent stuff, luminous as star-beams. Her tiny white feet were bare to the mossy forest floor as she stood at no more than a pace from him staring

dark-eyed. The thin music sounded again; she smiled.

Dan summoned stumbling thoughts. Was this being also—illusion? Had she no more reality than the loveliness of the forest? He opened his lips to speak, but a strained excited voice sounded in his ears. "Who are you?"

Had he spoken? The voice had come as if from another, like the sound of one's words in fever.

The girl smiled again. "English!" she said in queer, soft tones. "I can speak a little English." She spoke slowly, carefully. "I learned it from"—she hesitated—"my mother's father, whom they call the Gray Weaver."

Again came the voice in Dan's ears. "Who are you?"

"I am called Galatea," she said. "I came to find you."

"To find me?" echoed the voice that was Dan's.

"Leucon, who is called the Gray Weaver, told me," she explained smiling. "He said you will stay with us until the second moon from this. What are you called?"

"Dan," he muttered. His voice sounded oddly different.

"What a strange name!" said the girl. She stretched out her bare arm. "Come." She smiled.

Dan touched her extended hand, feeling without any surprise the living warmth of her rosy fingers. He had forgotten the paradoxes of illusion; this was no longer illusion to him, but reality, itself. It seemed to him that he followed her, walking over the shadowed turf that gave with springy crunch beneath his tread though Galatea left hardly an imprint. He glanced down, noting that he himself wore a silver garment, and that his feet were bare; with the glance he felt a feathery breeze on his body and a sense of mossy earth on his feet.

"Galatea," said his voice, "Galatea, what place is this? What language do you speak?"

She glanced back laughing. "Why, this is Paracosma, of course, and that is our language."

"Paracosma," muttered Dan, "Para—cosma!" A fragment of Greek that had survived somehow from a Sophomore course a decade in the past came strangely back to him. Paracosma! Land beyond-the-world!

Galatea cast a smiling glance at him. "Does the real world seem strange," she queried, "after that shadow world of yours?"

"Shadow world?" echoed Dan, bewildered. "This is shadow, not my world."

The girl's smile turned quizzical. "Poof!" she retorted with an impudently lovely pout. "And I suppose, then, that I am the phantom instead of you!" She laughed. "Do I seem ghostlike?"

Dan made no reply; he was puzzling over unanswerable questions as he trod behind the lithe figure of his guide. It seemed a mile, perhaps, before a sound of tinkling water obscured that other strange music. They emerged on the bank of a little river, swift and crystal-line, that rippled and gurgled. Galatea bent over the brink and cupped her hands, raising a few mouthfuls of water to her lips. Dan followed for example, finding the liquid stinging cold.

"How do we cross?" he asked.

"You can wade up there, but I always cross here." She poised herself for a moment on the green bank, then dived like a silver arrow into the pool. Dan followed. The water stung his body like champagne, but a stroke or two carried him across to where Galatea had already emerged with a glistening of creamy bare limbs.

Her garment clung tight as a metal sheath to her wet body; he felt a breath-taking thrill at the sight of her. And then, miraculously, the silver cloth was dry, the droplets rolled off as if from oiled silk, and they moved briskly on. The sweet pipings followed them, now loud, now whisper-soft, in a tenuous web of melody.

"Galatea!" said Dan suddenly. "Where is the music coming from?"

She looked back amazed. "You silly one!" she laughéd. "From the flowers, of course. See!" She plucked a purple star and held it to his ear. True enough, a faint and plaintive melody hummed out of the blossom. She tossed it in his startled face and skipped on.

SOON they beheld the objective of their journey—a building of white, marble-like stone, single-storied and vine covered, with broad glassless windows. They trod upon a path of bright pebbles to the arched entrance and,here, on an intricate stone bench, sat a gray-bearded patriarchal individual. Galatea addressed him in a liquid language that reminded Dan of the flower-pipings; then she turned. "This is Leucon," she said. as the ancient rose from his seat and snoke in English.

"We are happy, Galatea and I, to welcome you, since visitors are a rare pleasure here, and those from your shadowy country most rare."

Dan uttered puzzled words of thanks, and the old man nodded, reseating himself on the carven bench; Galatea skipped through the arched entrance, and Dan, after an irresolute moment, dropped to the remaining bench. Once more his thoughts were whirling in perplexing turbulence. Was all this indeed but illusion? Was he sitting. in actuality, in a prosaic hotel room, peering through magic spectacles that pictured this world about him, or was he, transported by some miracle, really sitting here in this land of loveliness?

"Leucon," said his voice, "how did you know I was coming?"

"I was told," said the other.

"By whom?"

"By no one."

"Why—someone must have told you!"

The Gray Weaver shook his solemn head. "I was just told."

Dan ceased his questioning, content for the moment to drink in the beauty about him, and then Galatea returned bearing a crystal bowl of the strange fruits. They were piled in colorful disorder, red, purple, orange and yellow, pear-shaped, egg-shaped, and clustered spheroids—fantastic, unearthly. He selected a pale, transparent ovoid, bit into it, and was deluged by a flood of sweet liquid, to the amusement of the girl.

"Galatea," he said, "do you ever go to a city? What cities are in Paracosma?"

"Cities? What are cities?"

"Places where many people live close together."

"Oh," said the girl, frowning. "No. There are no cities here."

"Then where are the people of Paracosma? You must have neighbors."

The girl looked puzzled. "A man and a woman live off there," she said, gesturing toward a distant blue range of hills dim on the horizon. "Far away over there. I went there once, but Leucon and I prefer the valley."

"But Galatea!" protested Dan. "Are you and Leucon alone in this valley? Where—what happened to your parents —your father and mother?"

"They went away. That way—toward the sunrise. They'll return some day."

"And if they don't?"

"Why, foolish one! What could hinder them?"

"Wild beasts," said Dan. "Poisonous insects. disease, flood, storm, lawless people, death!"

"I never heard those words," said Galatea. "There are no such things here." She sniffed contemptuously. "Lawless people!"

"Not—death?"

"What is death?"

"It's—" Dan paused helplessly. "It's like falling asleep and never waking. It's what happens to everyone at the end of life."

"I never heard of such a thing as the end of life!" said the girl decidedly. "There isn't such a thing."

"What happens, then," queried Dan desperately, "when one grows old?"

"Nothing, silly! No one grows old unless he wants to, like Leucon. A person grows to the age he likes best and

then stops. It's a law!"

Dan gathered his chaotic thoughts. He stared into Galatea's dark, lovely eyes. "Have you stopped yet?"

The dark eyes dropped; he was amazed to see a deep, embarrassed flush spread over her cheeks. She looked at Leucon nodding reflectively on his bench, then back to Dan, meeting his gaze.

"Not yet," she said.

"And when will you, Galatea?"

"When I have had the one child permitted me. You see"—she stared down at her dainty toes—"one cannot—have children—afterwards."

"Permitted? Permitted by whom?"

"By a law."

"Laws! Is everything here governed by laws? What of chance and accidents?"

"What are those—chance and accidents?"

"Things unexpected—things unforeseen."

"Nothing is unforeseen," said Galatea, still soberly. She repeated slowly, "Nothing is unforeseen." He fancied her voice was wistful.

LEUCON looked up. "Enough of this," he said abruptly. He turned to Dan. "I know these words of yours—chance, disease, death. They are not for Paracosma. Keep them in your unreal country."

"Where did you hear them, then?"

"From Galatea's mother," said the Gray Weaver, "who had them from your predecessor—a phantom who visited here before Galatea was born."

Dan had a vision of Ludwig's face. "What was he like?"

"Much like you."

"But his name?"

The old man's mouth was suddenly grim. "We do not speak of him," he said, and rose, entering the dwelling in cold silence.

"He goes to weave," said Galatea after a moment. Her lovely, piquant face was still troubled.

"What does he weave?"

"This." She fingered the silver cloth of her gown. "He weaves it out of metal bars on a very clever machine. I do not know the method."

"Who made the machine?"

"It was here."

"But Galatea! Who built the house? Who planted these fruit trees?"

"They were here. The house and trees were always here."

Dan thought a moment. "Were you born here?"

"I don't know." He noted in sudden concern that her eyes were glistening with tears.

"Galatea dear! Why are you unhappy? What's wrong?"

"Why, nothing!" She shook her black curls, smiled suddenly at him. "What could be wrong? How can one be unhappy in Paracosma?" She sprang erect and seized his hand. "Come! Let's gather fruit for tomorrow."

SHE darted off in a whirl of flashing silver, and Dan followed her around the wing of the edifice. Graceful as a dancer, she leaped for a branch above her head, caught it laughingly, and tossed a great golden globe to him. She loaded his arms with the bright prizes and sent him back for the crystal bowl that reposed empty on the bench, and when he returned, she piled it so full of fruit that a deluge of colorful spheres dropped around him.

The little sun was losing itself behind the trees of that colossal forest to the west, and a coolness stirred among long shadows. Of a sudden, the flowers were still, and the brook sang alone in a world of silence. In silence too, Dan followed Galatea through a doorway.

The chamber within was a spacious one, floored with large black and white squares; exquisite benches of carved marble were here and there. Old Leucon, in a far corner, bent over an intricate, glistening mechanism, and as Dan entered he drew a shining length of silver cloth from it, folded it, and placed it

carefully aside.

Galatea stood in a doorway to his left, leaning half-wearily against the frame; he placed the bowl of fruits on a bench at the entrance and moved to her side.

"This is yours," she said, indicating the room beyond. He looked in upon a pleasant, smaller chamber. A single glowing sphere, pendant by a chain from the ceiling, illuminated the room. Dan turned to the girl, whose eyes were still unwontedly serious.

"This is ideal," he said, "but, Galatea, how am I to turn out the light?"

"Turn it out?" she said. "You must cap it—so!" A faint smile showed again on her lips as she dropped a metal covering over the shining sphere. They stood tense in the darkness; Dan sensed her nearness achingly, and then the light was on once more. She moved toward the door, and there paused, taking his hand.

"Dear shadow," she said softly, "I hope your dreams are music." She was gone.

Dan stood irresolute in his chamber; he glanced into the large room where Leucon still bent over his work, and the Gray Weaver raised a hand in solemn salutation, but said nothing. He felt no urge for the old man's silent company and turned back into his room to prepare for slumber.

He slept. Almost instantly, it seemed, the dawn was upon him and bright elfin pipings were all about him, while the odd ruddy sun sent a broad slanting plane of light across the room. He rose as fully aware of his surroundings as if he had not slept at all. He emerged into the central chamber, noting curiously that the globes still glowed in dim rivalry to the daylight. He touched one casually; it was cool as metal to his fingers, and lifted freely from its standard. For a moment he held the cold flaming thing in his hands, then replaced it and wandered into the dawn.

Galatea was dancing up the path, eating a strange fruit as rosy as her lips. She was merry again, once more the happy nymph who had greeted him, and she gave him a bright smile as he chose

a sweet green ovoid for his breakfast.

"Come on!" she called. "To the river!"

She skipped away toward the unbelievable forest. Dan followed. Then they were laughing in the pool, splashing about until Galatea drew herself to the bank, glowing and panting. Strangely, he was neither tired nor breathless, with no sense of exertion. A question recurred to him, as yet unasked.

"Galatea," said his voice, "whom will you take as mate?"

Her eyes went serious. "I don't know," she said. "At the proper time he will come. That is a law."

"And will you be happy?"

"Of course." She seemed troubled. "Isn't everyone happy?"

"Not where I live, Galatea."

"Then that must be a strange place—that ghostly world of yours. A rather terrible place."

"It is, often enough," Dan agreed. "I wish—" He paused. What did he wish? Was he not talking to an illusion, a dream, an apparition? He looked at the girl, at her glistening black hair, her eyes, her soft white skin, and then, for a tragic moment, he tried to feel the arms of that drab hotel chair beneath his hands—and failed! He smiled; he reached out his fingers to touch her bare arm, and for an instant she looked back at him with startled, sober eyes, and sprang to her feet.

"Come on! I want to show you my country." She set off down the stream, and Dan rose reluctantly to follow.

WHAT a day that was! They traced the little river from still pool to singing rapids, and ever about them were the strange twitterings and pipings that were the voices of the flowers. They talked or were silent. Galatea twisted him a bright-blossomed garland for his head, and thereafter he moved always with a sweet singing about him. But little by little the red sun slanted toward the forest, and the hours dripped away. It was Dan who pointed it out, and reluctantly they turned homewards.

Galatea sang a strange song, plaintive and sweet, and again her eyes were sad.

"What song is that?" he asked.

"It is a song sung by another Galatea," she answered, "who is my mother." She laid her hand on his arm. "I will make it into English for you." She sang:

"The River lies in flower and fern,
In flower and fern it breathes a song,
It breathes a song of your return,
Of your return in years too long.

In years too long its murmurs bring—
Its murmurs bring their vain replies.
Their vain replies the flowers sing,
The flowers sing, 'The River Lies!'"

Her voice quavered on the final notes; there was silence save for the tinkle of water and the flower bugles. Dan said, "Galatea—" and paused. The girl was again somber-eyed, tearful. He said, huskily, "That's a sad song, Galatea. Why was your mother sad? You said everyone was happy in Paracosma."

"She broke the law," replied the girl tonelessly. "It is the inevitable way to sorrow." She faced him. "She fell in love with a phantom!" Galatea said. "One of your shadowy race, who came, and stayed and then had to go back. So when her appointed lover came, it was too late. Do you understand? But she yielded finally to the law, and is forever unhappy, and goes wandering from place to place about the world." She paused. "I shall never break a law," she said defiantly.

Dan took her hand. "I would not have you unhappy, Galatea. I want you always happy."

She shook her head. "I am happy," she said, and smiled a tender, wistful smile.

They were silent a long time as they trudged the way homeward. Leucon sat on his bench by the portal.

"I am very tired," Galatea said, and slipped within.

Dan moved to follow, but the old man raised a staying hand.

"Friend from the shadows," he said, "will you hear me a moment?"

Dan paused, acquiesced, and dropped to the opposite bench. He felt a sense of foreboding; nothing pleasant awaited him.

"There is something to be said," Leucon continued, "and I say it without desire to pain you, if phantoms feel pain. It is this: Galatea loves you, though I think she has not yet realized it."

"I love her too," said Dan.

"Then woe to both of you! For this is impossible in Paracosma; it is in conflict with the laws. Galatea's mate is appointed, perhaps even now approaching."

"Laws! Laws!" muttered Dan. "Whose laws are they? Not Galatea's nor mine!"

"But they exist," said the Gray Weaver. "It is not for you nor for me to criticize them—though I yet wonder what power could annul them to permit your presence here!"

"I had no voice in your laws, Gray Weaver."

The old man peered at him in the dusk. "Has anyone, anywhere, a voice in the laws?" he queried.

"In my country we have," retorted Dan.

"Madness!" growled Leucon. "Man-made laws! Of what use are man-made laws with only man-made penalties, or none at all? If you shadows make a law that the wind shall blow only from the east, does the west wind obey it?"

"Some of our laws may be stupid, but they're no more unjust than yours, Gray Weaver."

"Ours," said the Gray Weaver, "are the unalterable laws of the world, the laws of nature. Violation is always unhappiness. I have seen it, I have known it in another, in Galatea's mother, though Galatea is stronger than she." He paused. "Now," he continued, "I ask only for mercy; your stay is short, and I ask that you do no more harm than is already done. Be merciful; give her no more to regret."

Dan turned silent and unhappy to his own chamber.

AGAIN he rose at the glow of dawn, and again Galatea was before him, meeting him at the door with her bowl of fruit. She deposited her burden, giving him a wan little smile of greeting, and stood facing him as if waiting.

"Come with me, Galatea," he said.

"Where?"

"To the river bank. To talk."

They trudged in silence to the brink of Galatea's pool. Dan noted a subtle difference in the world about him. Outlines were vague, the thin flower pipings less audible, and the very landscape was queerly unstable, shifting like smoke when he wasn't looking at it directly. And strangely, though he had brought the girl here to talk to her, he had now nothing to say, but sat in aching silence with his eyes on the loveliness of her face.

Galatea pointed at the red ascending sun. "So short a time," she said, "before you go back to your phantom world. I shall be sorry, very sorry." She touched his cheek with her fingers. "Dear shadow!"

"Suppose," said Dan huskily, "that I won't go. What if I won't leave here?" His voice grew fiercer. "I'll not go! I'm going to stay!"

The calm mournfulness of the girl's face checked him; he felt the irony of struggling against the inevitable progress of a dream. She spoke. "Had I the making of the laws, you should stay. But you can't, dear one. You can't!"

Forgotten now were the words of the Gray Weaver. "I love you, Galatea," he said.

"And I you," she whispered. "See, dearest shadow, how I break the same law my mother broke, and am glad to face the sorrow it will bring." She placed her hand tenderly over his. "Leucon is very wise and I am bound to obey him, but this is beyond his wisdom because he let himself grow old." She paused. "He let himself grow old," she repeated slowly. A strange light gleamed in her dark eyes as she turned suddenly to Dan.

"Dear one!" she said tensely. "That thing that happens to the old—that death of yours! What follows it?"

"What follows death?" he echoed. "Who knows?"

"But—" Her voice was quivering. "But one can't simply—vanish! There must be an awakening."

"Who knows?" said Dan again. "There are those who believe we wake to a happier world, but—" He shook his head hopelessly.

"It must be true! Oh, it must be!" Galatea cried. "There must be more for you than the mad world you speak of!" She leaned very close. "Suppose, dear," she said, "that when my appointed lover arrives, I send him away. Suppose I have no child, but let myself grow old, older than Leucon, old until death. Would I join you in your happier world?"

"Galatea!" he cried distractedly. "Oh, my dearest—what a terrible thought!"

"More terrible than you know," she whispered, still very close to him. "It is more than violation of the law, it is rebellion! Everything is planned, everything was foreseen, except this; and if I have no child, her place will be left unfilled, and the places of her children, and of their children, and so on until some day the whole great plan of Paracosma fails of whatever its destiny was to be." Her whisper grew very faint and fearful. "It is destruction, but I love you more than I fear—death!"

Dan's arms were about her. "No, Galatea! No! Promise me!"

SHE murmured, "I can promise and then break my promise." She drew his head down; their lips touched, and he felt a fragrance and a taste like honey in her kiss. "At least," she breathed, "I can give you a name by which to love you. Philometros! Measure of my love!"

"A name?" muttered Dan. A fantastic idea shot through his mind—a way of proving to himself that all this was reality, and not just a page that any one could read who wore old Ludwig's magic spectacles. If Galatea would speak his name! Perhaps, he thought daringly, perhaps then he could stay! He thrust her away.

"Galatea!" he cried. "Do you remember my name?"

She nodded silently, her unhappy eyes on his.

"Then say it! Say it, dear!"

She stared at him dumbly, miserably, but made no sound.

"Say it, Galatea!" he pleaded desperately. "My name, dear—just my name!" Her mouth moved, she grew pale with effort, and Dan could have sworn that his name trembled on her quivering lips, though no sound came.

At last she spoke. "I can't, dearest one! Oh, I can't! A law forbids it!" She stood suddenly erect, pallid as ivory carving. "Leucon calls!" she said, and darted away. Dan followed along the pebbled path, but her speed was beyond his powers; at the portal he found only the Gray Weaver standing cold and stern. He raised his hand as Dan appeared.

"Your time is short," he said. "Go, thinking of the havoc you have done."

"Where's Galatea?" gasped Dan.

"I have sent her away." The old man blocked the entrance; for a moment Dan would have struck him aside, but something withheld him. He stared wildly about the meadow—there! A flash of silver beyond the river, at the edge of the forest. He turned and raced toward it, while motionless and cold the Gray Weaver watched him go.

"Galatea!" he called. "Galatea!"

But the world was growing cloudy; Paracosma was dissolving around him. Hopelessly he cried out her name—"Galatea!"

After an endless time, he paused; something familiar about the spot struck him, and just as the red sun edged above him, he recognized the place—the very point at which he had entered Paracosma! A sense of futility overwhelmed him as for a moment he

gazed on an unbelievable apparition—a dark window hung in mid-air before him, through which glowed rows of electric lights. Ludwig's window!

It vanished. But the trees writhed and the sky darkened, and he swayed dizzily in turmoil. He realized suddenly that he was no longer standing, but sitting in the midst of the crazy glade, and his hands clutched something smooth and hard—the arms of the miserable hotel chair. Then at last he saw her, close before him—Galatea, with sorrow-stricken features, her fear-filled eyes on his. He made a terrific effort to rise, stood erect, and fell sprawling in a blaze of coruscating lights.

HE STRUGGLED to his knees. Walls — Ludwig's room — encompassed him; he must have slipped from the chair. The magic spectacles lay before him, one lens splintered and spilling a fluid no longer water-clear, but white as milk.

"God!" he muttered.

He felt shaken, sick, exhausted, with a bitter sense of bereavement, and his head ached fiercely. The room was drab, disgusting; he wanted to get out of it. He glanced automatically at his watch; four o'clock—he must have sat here nearly five hours. For the first time, he noticed Ludwig's absence; he was glad of it and walked dully out of the door to an automatic elevator. There was no response to his ring; someone was using the thing. He walked three flights to the street and back to his own room.

In love with a vision! Worse—in love with a girl who had never lived, in a fantastic Utopia that was literally nowhere. He threw himself on his bed with a groan that was half a sob.

He saw finally the implication of the name Galatea. Galatea—Pygmalion's statue, given life by Venus in the ancient Grecian myth. But his Galatea, warm and lovely and vital, must remain forever without the gift of life, since he was neither Pygmalion nor God.

He woke late in the morning, staring uncomprehendingly about for the fountain and pool of Paracosma. Slow comprehension dawned. How much—how much—of last night's experience had been real? How much was the product of alcohol? Or had old Ludwig been right, and was there no difference between reality and dream?

He changed his rumpled attire and wandered despondently to the street. He found Ludwig's hotel at last. Inquiry revealed that the diminutive professor had checked out, leaving no forwarding address.

What of it? Even Ludwig couldn't give what he sought, a living Galatea. Dan was glad that he had disappeared; he hated the little professor. Professor? Hypnotists called themselves "professors." He dragged through a weary day and then a sleepless night on the train to Chicago where his home was.

IT WAS mid-winter when he saw a suggestively tiny figure ahead of him in the Loop. *Ludwig!* His cry was automatic, "Professor Ludwig!"

The elfin figure turned, recognized him, smiled.

They stepped into the shelter of a building.

"I'm sorry about your machine, Professor. I'd be glad to pay for the damage."

"Oh, that was nothing—a cracked lens. But you—have you been ill? You look much the worse."

"It's nothing," said Dan. "Your show was marvelous. Professor—marvelous! I'd have told you so, but you were gone when it ended."

Ludwig shrugged. "I went to the lobby for a cigar."

"It was marvelous!" repeated Dan.

"So real?" smiled the other. "Only because you co-operated, then. It takes self-hypnosis."

"It was real, all right," agreed Dan glumly. "I don't understand it—that strange beautiful country."

"The trees were club-mosses enlarged by a lens," said Ludwig. "All was trick

photography, but stereoscopic, as I told you—three dimensional. The fruits were rubber; the house is a summer building on our campus—Northern University. And the voice was mine; you didn't speak at all, except your name at the first, and I left a blank for that. I played your part, you see; I went around with the photographic apparatus strapped on my head, to keep the viewpoint always that of the observer. See?"

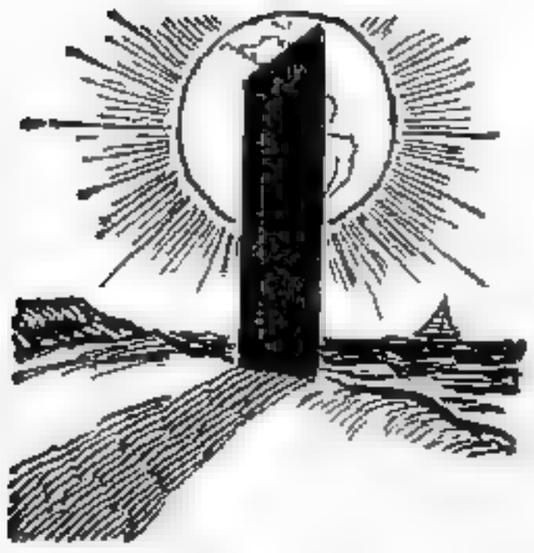
He grinned wryly. "Luckily I'm rather short, or you'd have seemed a giant."

"Wait a minute!" said Dan, his mind whirling. "You say you played my part. Then Galatea—is she real too?"

"Lea's real enough," said the Professor. "My niece, a senior at Northern, and likes dramatics. She helped me out with the thing. Why? Want to meet her?"

Dan answered eagerly, happily. An ache had vanished, a pain was erased. Paracosma was attained at last!

Time Capsule



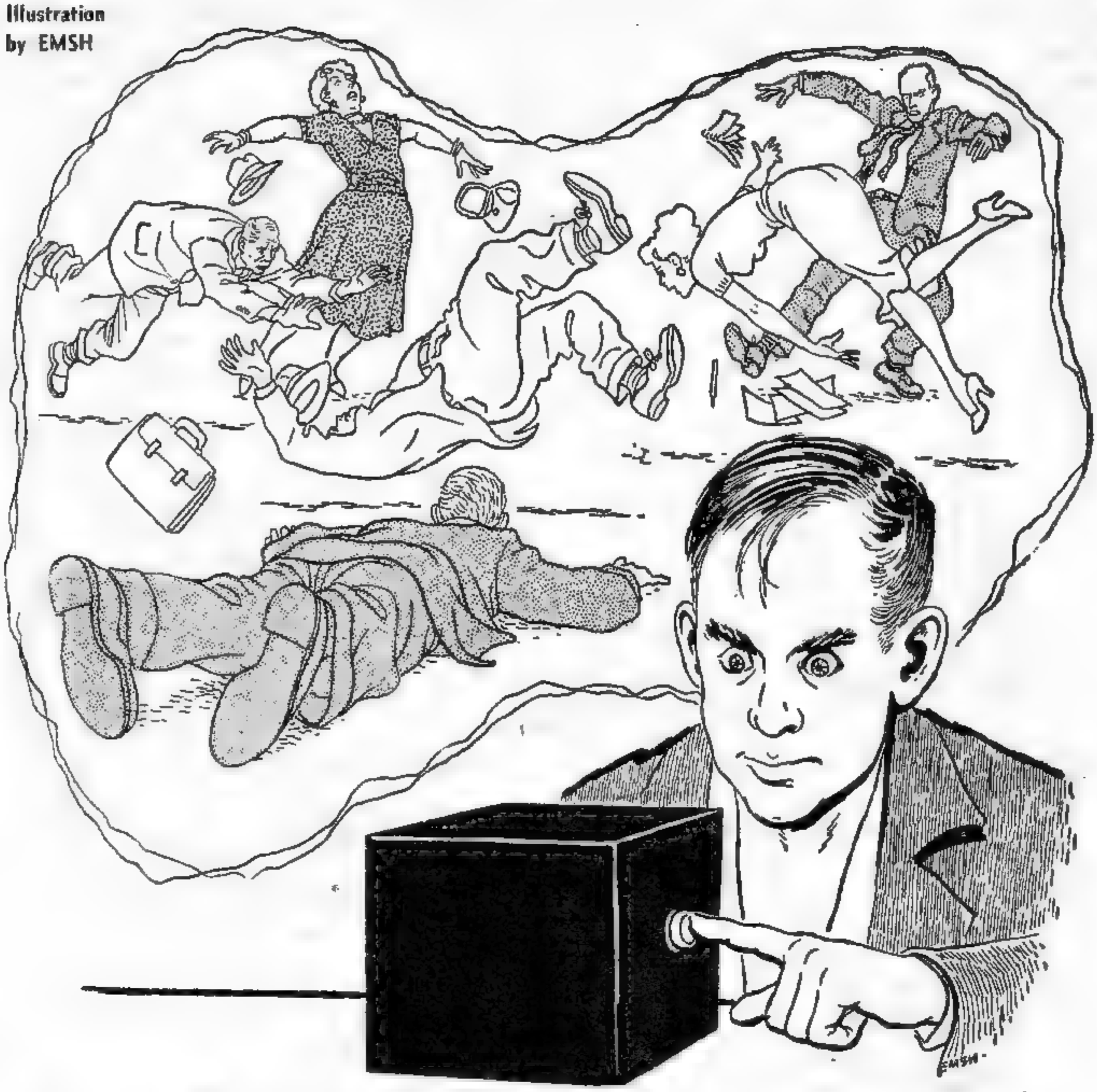
by A. Kulik

With eager hands they opened it
(A thousand years had passed)
And showed its contents to a crowd
That gaped in wonder vast.
They found a wheel, a gyroscope,
Some drugs, a chest of tools,
A tripod, a projector and
Some lengthy film on spools;
It held a clock, a knife, a pen.
And crates of books whose pages
Explained these musty marvels from
The long-forgotten ages.

One shook the clock and stole the knife,
One bit the pen to taste it,
Two others smashed the gyro and
The box that had encased it;
For they were only savages
Who lived in caves once more;
The Capsule had been buried at
The start of Man's Last War.
They left the treasure after that;
The lonely years forgot it.
The winters and the rains went on,
The Capsule slowly rotted.

But for a time their fires blinked
When stars were roundabout,
Till one by one they disappeared . . .
Their fires flickered out.

Illustration
by EMSH



No More Friction

By DR. DAVID H. KELLER

With his little box, Timothy put the world on skids!

IT WAS odd, Timothy Tompkins was thinking, how sometimes just a word, or a phrase, or some little human action—or lack of it—could give an idea to a man with an inventive mind.

As now. Caroline, his wife, had given him the idea of a lifetime! He knew it, but she didn't! She thought she was bawling him out. Caroline never had had much patience with him and his ideas. She called his experiments, whatever they were, "wasting time." Just because he had

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never come home one day and poured a golden flood into her lap, she thought his experiments were useless. . . .

"I don't see why we can't get along without clashing and quarreling all the time," Caroline was saying petulantly. "Always about the same old thing—money, money, money that we haven't got. It's come to a point where we rub each other the wrong way every time we open our mouths. Other people can get along without friction, but we—"

There! She had said it again. Friction! Timothy Tompkins' mind was immediately off on roller-bearing wheels. He didn't even hear the rest of his wife's familiar complaint about how she had to make one dollar do the work of two, and how could he expect her to be sweet and amiable when she had a dreamy idiot in the house, instead of a go-getter who could bring home enough cash to make the domestic wheels go round.

Just one word was ringing in his mind —friction—and a vast vision of what he meant to do with it. This time he would not fail! He could not! It was too plain in his mind—the greatest dream of his life, born of an idle word.

"When I was a kid," he said dreamily, "I was riding in a carriage, and the man had forgotten to grease the axle. It started to get hot, then to smoke, and—"

"That's more than you do!" snapped Mrs. Tompkins. "And what an answer to *me*! I'm talking about serious things, practical things, and you—Timothy Tompkins, are you crazy?"

"Maybe." He shrugged. "The jury isn't in yet."

His mind was too busy for argument. He was thinking about friction, and ball bearing and cylinder bearings, and now lubrication was the big thing that made carriages and automobiles and even airplanes possible. In a deep brown study, he moved toward the door.

"Here!" called Caroline peremptorily. "Where do you think you're going? I told you—"

Timothy Tompkins looked up at his wife and grinned.

"Eh?" he said vaguely. "Oh, yes. Pardon me, my dear, but I've got to go out and buy a pair of roller skates."

"Well!" said Caroline Tompkins, and sat down hard as the door closed on her vague-eyed husband. She knew the symptoms. And it seemed hopeless.

BUT Timothy Tompkins got his roller skates. Nightly he rolled along on them on back streets, and when he thought himself expert enough, he started in to make reality of the dream that one word from his exasperated Caroline had conjured up.

But wasn't it always like that? Every time he got Caroline on her high horse, whatever the reason, he always came out the winner. Invariably she said something that started a train of thought toward a new invention. And this one sprung full-panoplied into his brain.

When Timothy Tompkins was sure of his balance on the roller skates, he fastened a little box, about an inch square, on each skate, pressed a little button on each box and started to skate. The little button was part of a control switch he had made that pulled a neutralizing screen from the magnets, allowing them to exert their field.

He started to roll along. And he kept on rolling! He didn't even have to move a muscle. He had it! The secret of controlling friction! All in this little machine he had based on such a simple idea! It was so elementary that the wonder to him was why nobody had thought of it before.

Gravity and friction, the two forces that slow things down, could neither one be entirely removed, he knew, but it would help if their effect could be *reduced*. If gravity could be given just a slight twist aside, it might not grip so strongly. And if a more perfect lubricant could be made, friction would be reduced.

He had found his answer to both problems. By creating a field of strain between two small but powerful magnets

made out of a new alloy, he was able to give gravity the slight twist. He had done even better. The force was the type that could make small bodies repellent to one another; it was the very opposite of magnetism! That made it the ideal lubricant. Ball bearings rotated without friction in the field's sphere of influence, simply because they never touched the axle! Naturally there was no friction.

So successful was his first try-out of his invention on his roller skates, that when he got going he could not stop. He went for several miles before he could turn around a block and come back. When he finally managed to press other little buttons and stop, he sat down on the curbstone, breathless, a little uncertain whether he was more elated or dazed.

"It's not perpetual motion," he told himself. "Because it just can't be! But it's practically the same thing. It's motion without friction. That means that once a machine equipped with it is started, it will go on for a mighty long time with practically nothing except the force necessary to start it."

His eyes glistened at the vision.

"Why, I can make these boxes as large as is necessary for any machine! I can attach them to automobiles, or even to trains!"

His brain buzzed with the vastness of the possibilities that opened up before him. If he could sell his invention to a railroad company, trains could be run at a fraction of what they cost the companies now. The railroads could make a comeback—which meant to Timothy Tompkins that if the X. & G. Railroad, in particular, came back, the stocks his father had left him would pay a nice dividend, and maybe Caroline would have something else to talk about instead of his ineffectiveness.

No time was like the present to Tompkins—which was why he appeared at the country home of George Blunt, president of the X. & G. Railroad early the next morning. Blunt was eating breakfast, but he was not enjoying it. Too many other things were on his mind. His road had passed another dividend—completely passed it—and it looked as if it were only a question of time before it passed into the hands of receiver.

"Tell this man Timothy Tompkins I'm not at home," he growled at his butler.

"Pardon me, but he says he has to see you, sir."

"What does he want?"

"He says," the butler murmured deprecatingly, "that he wants to put your railroad on its feet."

"Hell's bells! It hasn't any shoes! I'll fire him off the place myself, if you can't."

The worried Blunt rushed through the house to Tompkins.

"What do you mean by disturbing me?" he demanded. "Get out!"

"You have to listen to me, Mr. Blunt," Tompkins announced firmly. "I've invented something that will put your railroad on its feet. It's about friction. Understand? *Friction!* You are spending money for coal, oil, wear and tear. I can stop that! You can carry freight and compete with trucks, carry passengers at half a cent a mile and make money. You must listen!"

" 'Must' is a big word," snapped Blunt.

"But my idea is a big idea. Look! I'll show you on this concrete walk. You can't slide on that, can you, like a boy would on ice?"

"Of course not."

"Why not? The answer's plain. Too much friction between the concrete and the shoes. But if there were no friction you could slide. Now I have two little boxes here in my pocket, and I'm going to fasten them on my shoes. I'm going to press this little button, take a short run and slide. You just watch me!"

He fastened the boxes to his shoes, took a short run and started to slide. He went on, and on, down to the end of the walk, and down the street.

"Get the idea?" he asked, when he came back. "No friction. Just start and keep going. Make other boxes like these

bigger, a little more powerful. Place one on every locomotive, every freight car, every passenger train. Turn off the steam. You keep on going at no cost. A hundred yards from the station turn off the little boxes and put on your brakes. Reduce your rates, but make more money because you can carry more freight and more passengers, and carry them a lot cheaper that your competitors can."

Blunt looked at them. Suddenly he said:

"The power, or force, or whatever you call it that's in those little boxes—would it run an automobile?"

"Of course," the inventor said confidently. "Though I haven't tried it yet."

"Well, we will fasten them on my runabout and see," Blunt said. This was beginning to look more important to him than eating breakfast.

When they were in the car, with the boxes fastened to the running board, the inventor gave Blunt one final injunction.

"Just remember that your brakes won't work very well so long as the antifriction boxes are working. Those brakes work by friction. Better select a flat straightaway that is a little upgrade."

They reached such a spot shortly and Blunt shut off the power and started the machine coasting. Timothy Tompkins pressed the buttons.

The car kept on going. Not fast, but on and on. Then they came to a curve and Blunt suddenly yelled:

"Shut off the power! This car is not steering right!"

At last they came to a stop. Blunt took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his bald head.

"We went five miles without a bit of gasoline!" he gasped. "I can hardly believe it, but I saw it myself! You've got something here—something big, if it can be controlled. Our engineers will have to work out the proper proportions between the weight of the car and the friction surfaces. Come on back to the house and I'll give you five hundred dollars for a seven-day option on your invention."

DINNER had been ready for two hours when Timothy Tompkins got home. Caroline was not in the best of humor, but what he said cheered her up.

"We're eating out," he told her, laughing at her impatience. "At the best place you know. I made some of that household axle grease you were talking about. Five hundred dollars! And that's just a start! We're going to be rich, honey. At last I have something that is going to bring in money—more than you can ever spend!"

The next five days were busy ones for Timothy Tompkins. He, Blunt, and three engineers spent the time experimenting with the new power. Then Tompkins was handed five thousand dollars and asked to sign on the dotted line of the thirtieth page of an agreement. He read the first fifteen pages, but by that time was so confused by the legal wordage that he took the last fifteen pages for granted. He thought the five thousand was a first payment, though Blunt had a different idea.

Tompkins and his wife went to Europe on a second honeymoon. They did not return for four months, which brought to an end a perfect vacation and a perfect five thousand dollars. The first thing the inventor did on his return was to take his X. & G. Railroad stocks and bonds to a stock broker. He wanted to know their value since the new invention had gone into use.

The broker laughed shortly.

"They're worth about thirty cents a hundred pounds," he said. "Don't you know what happened?"

A worried frown creeping over his brow, the inventor shook his head. "No. I've been in Europe for four months."

"Hmm! Well, the X. & G. roads went smash. Blunt and his associates formed a new company and bought out every crippled railroad in the country—and every one of them is a paying proposition now. Looks as if they were headed for control of the entire railroad system of America. That new invention of theirs enables them to operate at a tenth of

their former cost. They have the automobile manufacturers gasping. The truck business is at a standstill. Blunt and his associates probably have made several millions. But your stocks and bonds are just so much paper."

"So it worked?" Tompkins said slowly.

"What worked?" asked the surprised broker.

"My invention. I sold the idea to Blunt. Well, at least I have an agreement with him."

"That agreement had better be shown to your lawyer." the broker advised bruskly. "Blunt is as smart a man as there is in the country—and about the crookedest."

Timothy Tompkins took that advice—and got one of the surprises of his life about what the lawyer found on the thirtieth page of the contract.

"It means, Mr. Tompkins," the lawyer explained, "that you will not get another red cent from him than the five thousand dollars you have already received."

"But he told me that was the first payment," objected the shocked inventor.

"And neglected to tell you it was also the last."

And that was that. But Tompkins discovered a number of other things during the next few days. For one thing, he learned that Blunt had bought the famous Metropolis Building where he occupied the two upper floors. And he learned that the anti-friction machines, carefully guarded by patents, was revolutionizing transportation by rail.

TWO months after Timothy Tompkins had returned from Europe, his betrayer, George Blunt, was faced with some startling information that stared out from the front pages of every newspaper. A dozen automobile and lubrication men who had come to the Metropolis Building to try to negotiate with Blunt had slipped and fallen on the polished marble floor in front of the ground floor elevators; most of them were old men with brittle bones. One had a severe head injury; three had broken wrists, one a dislocated hip joint, and several had bad ankle sprains.

"The total amount of damages asked for will be over a million dollars," the magnate's confidential lawyer told him.

"We will fight every one of them!" Blunt yelled angrily.

"But there will be more unpleasant newspaper publicity," the lawyer murmured. "And you know how you dislike it."

The next day there were similar inexplicable accidents in front of the elevator doors on the nineteenth floor. The following day the thirty-third floor seemed to be the sliding place. Damage suits were being filed every hour. It was Christmas time for the legal profession. When three hundred people fell on the first floor again the next day, hysteria reached a climax. Half the tenants moved out.

Total damage suits against Blunt as owner of the building amounted to a million and a quarter. He had been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of sweating, but finally believed he knew what was happening.

So he made a call at the home of Timothy Tompkins.

Mrs. Tompkins did not know where her husband was, she said. The last she had heard from him he had been on his way to China. She hoped Mr. Blunt would find him as she was practically destitute. She cried, and he would have felt sorry for such a pretty woman if he had not been so concerned with his own troubles.

Nor was his mind eased the next day. Elevator service in his office building was at a standstill. The machinery in the basement was running wild. Flywheels were breaking from the terrific speed of their revolutions.

And who could expect rich, elderly men to walk up thirty to fifty long flights of stairs?

Blunt at once went into conference with the scientists who had worked for him making the anti-friction boxes practical for railroads.

"I KNOW what happened!" he exploded. "That idiot Tompkins is planting his little boxes around in strategic positions that's what! Everybody in this building is mad as hell about it—but that's not the worst. If he can do it here, he can do it anywhere. A smash-up on one of our railroad lines, two or three bad accidents, would make the passengers abandon them, no matter how low we put the rates! One of his little boxes will effect everything in its radius."

"Why don't you compromise with Tompkins?" suggested the chief engineer. "Or have him arrested, if you think he's the cause of all these accidents?"

"Got to find him first," growled the railroad magnate. "And I can't. Nobody can. I've got bills for over a hundred thousand dollars from the city's best detective agency. But no results. His wife says he's on his way to China." He snorted. "Maybe."

"Well, all I can say," one of his advisers remarked grimly, "is that you'd *better* find him. Before you have wrecks all over the place."

Blunt hated to do it, but he swallowed his fury and inserted a personal in the *Morning Blade.* It did not bring the inventor, but it brought his lawyer.

"For various reasons it is impossible for Mr. Tompkins to see you himself," the lawyer explained. "We feel that he was robbed when he signed a certain agreement with you he did not understand. He also had fifty thousand dollars worth of stocks in the X. & G. Railroad, and you know what happened to the value of that stock."

"What I did was legal!" snapped Blunt. "But what this insane man has done—why it's only Providence that prevented anyone being killed."

The lawyer shrugged. "Perhaps. But he does not think so. He's a pretty desperate man, too, Mr. Blunt. Feels that he invented a device that should be given to the world, and wants the world to know about it and how it would add to the wealth and happiness of mankind. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll give him a reasonable income for the rest of his life."

The lawyer laughed shortly. "Generous of you," he drawled. "But here's what he wants: He wants his device on every automobile, on every machine, in every home. He wants it to be given to the world just as insulin was. He declares that a hundred million of his little boxes scattered throughout the nation would bring back prosperity."

Blunt brought his fist down on his desk with a smash. "I won't do it!" he cried. "That's final!"

And that was the end of that conference.

The next day seven of the swankiest stores on Fifth Avenue were anonymously advised to notify customers that it would be dangerous to enter their stores between three and four o'clock. If they wanted further details, it was suggested they consult Mr. Blunt, the railroad magnate.

Naturally he declared he knew nothing about it and refused to accept any responsibility. Some refused to heed the warning, with the result that between three and four a choice collection of society matrons, casual strollers and dowagers slid, slipped, and skidded in front of these stores to their mutual distress and the frantic annoyance of the owners. Even the police could do nothing, though they besieged Blunt.

The railroad magnate figuratively tore his hair, but after that affair he was on the verge of surrendering, of giving Timothy Tompkins whatever he asked for. But Timothy Tompkins did not know that—Timothy Tompkins who took off his overalls as janitor in Blunt's Metropolis Building that night and tumbled into bed.

Tompkins sighed heavily. Well, he had done almost all he could, and he seemed to be getting nowhere with Blunt. He would have to strike at Wall Street now—the heart of the money district, the pulse of America . . .

WITH his new and better demagnetizers that would work by remote control from the basement of the Metropolis Building, Timothy Tompkins was ready. Sending a trusted assistant down to Wall Street to throw the switch at the proper time, he threw aside his cloak of silence and gave a startling story to the newspapers through an advertisement he inserted. The papers carried the story with scareheads, as well as the ad which warned New Yorkers to stay out of a two-mile radius of Wall Street between nine and five that day, and to start no machinery of any kind within that area. Shipping was warned; also airplanes.

The inventor felt shivery tremors down his back as he read those stories.

"Maybe I'd better call it all off," he muttered. "Something might go wrong and there'll be thousands of curious down there. No! I won't call it off! Blunt must be made to pay. If they won't heed the warning, let them blame him! At nine I'll phone Peter to push the button."

Down in Wall Street business was starting as usual. And unusual crowds were in the streets, curious crowds, milling about looking for promised excitement; in carnival moods. Subways, elevated lines, buses and automobiles brought their quotas to add to the thousands trying to get inside the two-mile circle.

Vendors had grasped the opportunity for gain, and were crying their wares—flags, balloons, ground grippers to be put on shoes. One man was even selling skis. His was the spirit of the crowd that did not believe anything was going to happen, but wanted to be there if it did.

"Slide on the cement!" he yelled. "Don't wait for winter."

Suddenly, a few seconds after nine, it happened!

Through field glasses, as he stood on the roof of the Metropolis Building, Timothy Tompkins saw a hundred elevators crash through the tops of buildings, sail into the air, then crash sickeningly down to the streets. Thousands of people were sliding helter-skelter. Ferry boats, steamers, crashed into each other. Automobiles crashed in every direction, with surplus power and no control.

In Timothy Tompkins' wildest dreams he had never expected totally to eliminate friction in that region, and much of the gravity.

"I've got to stop it!" he screamed. "Hundreds will be killed! They're dying now!"

He raced for the telephone.

"Hello! Hello! Peter? Listen to me—*listen!* Turn it off! Turn—What? You can't hear me? I'm screaming now. Turn it *off!* I am talking as loud as I can! There's something wrong with my voice—it's squeaking! Turn it off, turn—"

He dropped the phone suddenly.

"The line is dead!" he groaned. "Every piece of electricity in the city is out of commission, I suppose—motors running wild. I can hear it—tearing loose! I've got to stop it—God, I can't walk! Everything is sliding. I'm slithering into hell with the blood of thousands on my hands, and I can't speak above a whisper!"

SOMEONE had him by the shoulders, shaking him.

"Wake up, Timothy! You're having a nightmare."

He opened his eyes. Surprisingly he was still on his basement cot. Beside him stood Caroline, George Blunt, and the woman he had never seen before. They all seemed happy and excited.

"This is Mrs. Blunt," said Caroline. "She came to see me and we decided to put an end to that nonsense outside of the Fifth Avenue stores. It interferes with our shopping terribly. She and I have brought Mr. Blunt so you two can get together and fix it up."

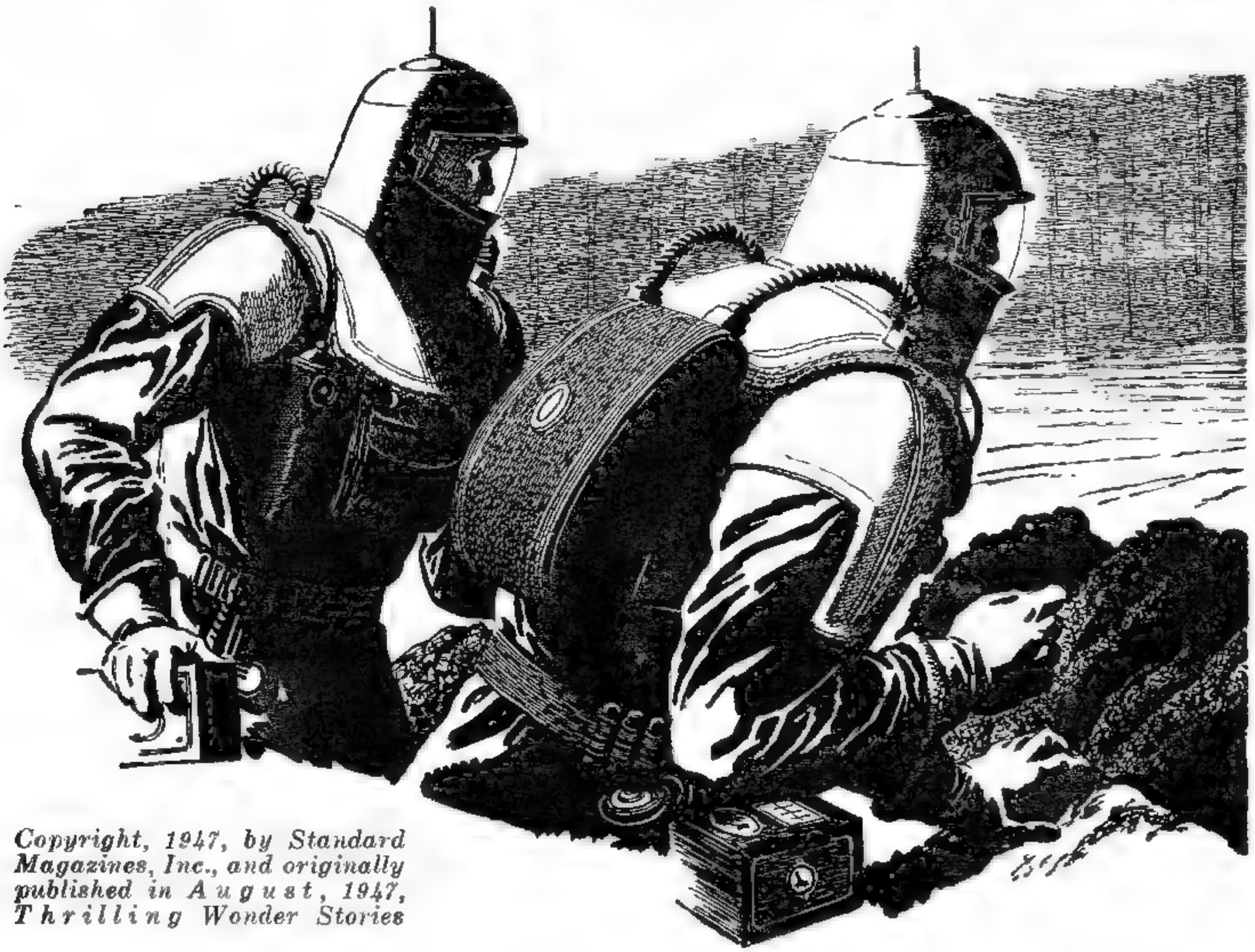
"Right, Tompkins," Blunt admitted ruefully. "I'm surrendering unconditionally, and I advise you to do the same."

Tompkins looked wildly around.

(Continued on page 78)

ATOMIC!

a novelet by HENRY KUTTNER



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I: *The Eye*

THE alarm went off just after midnight. The red signal showed emergency. But it was always emergency at first. We all knew that. Ever since the arachnid tribe in the Chicago Ring had mutated we'd known better than to take chances. That time the human race had very nearly gone under. Not many people knew how close we'd been to extinction. But I knew.

Everybody in Biological Control Labs knew. To anyone who lived before the Three-Hour War such things would have sounded incredible. Even to us now they sound hard to believe. But we *know*.

There are four hundred and three Rings scattered all over the world and every one of them is potentialily deadly.

Our Lab was north of what had been Yonkers and was a deserted, ruinous wilderness now. The atomic bomb of

After the great war, mutants were dangerous,

ATOMIC!

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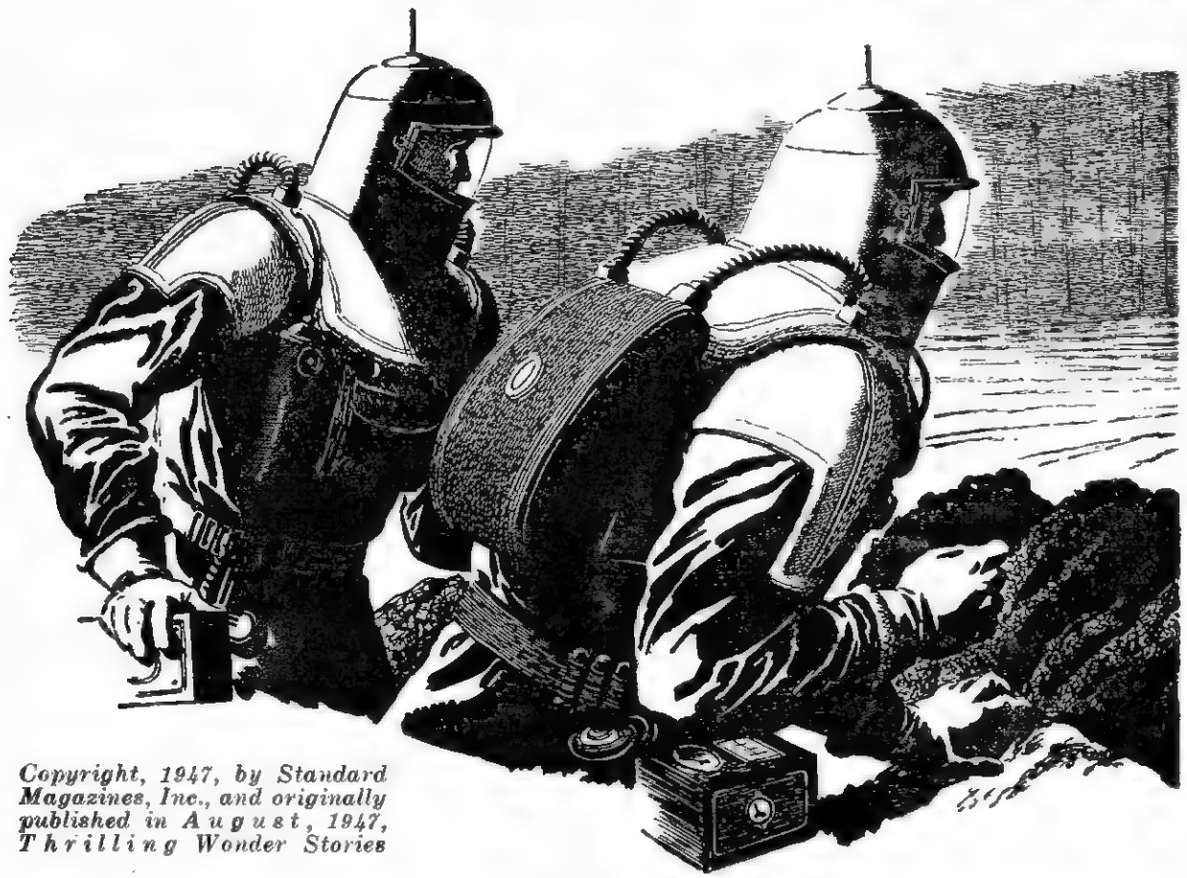

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Illustration by PAUL ORBAN

One of the women came up out of the lake . . . and picked her way toward us over the lava-like rock

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The war ended incredibly fast. But what lingered afterward made the real danger, the time-bomb that may quite easily lead to the wiping out of our whole civilization. We don't know yet. All we can do is keep the Labs going and the planes out watching.

That's the menace—the mutations.

IT WAS familiar stuff to me. I recorded the televised report on the office ticker, punched a few buttons and turned around to look at Dob Davidson, the new hand. He'd been here for two weeks,

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but none more dangerous than the lake. . . .

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mostly learning the ropes.

My assistant, Williams, was due for a vacation and I had about decided to take young Davidson on as a substitute.

"Want to go out and look it over, Dave?" I asked.

"Sure. That's a red alarm, isn't it? Emergency?"

I pulled a mike forward.

"Send up relief men," I ordered, "and wake Williams to take over. Get the recon copter ready. Red flight." Then I turned to Davidson.

"It'll be routine," I told him, "unless something unexpected happens. Not much data yet. The sky-scanners showed a cave-in and some activity around it. May be nothing but we can't take chances. It's Ring Seventy-Twelve."

"That's where the air liner crashed last week, isn't it?" Dave asked, looking up with renewed interest. "Any dope yet on what became of the passengers?"

"Nothing. The radiations would have got them if nothing else did. That's in the closed file now, poor devils. Still, we might spot the ship." I stood up. "The whole thing may be a wild-goose chase but we never take any chances with the Rings."

"It ought to be interesting, anyhow," Dave said and followed me out.

We could see it from a long way off. Four hundred and three of them dot the world now, but in the days before the War no one could have imagined such a thing as a Ring and it would be hard to make anyone visualize one through bare description. You have to *feel* the desolation as you fly over that center of bare, splashed rock in which nothing may ever grow again until the planet itself distintegrates, and see around that dead core the violently boiling life of the Ring.

It was a perimeter of life brushed by the powers of death. The sun-forces unleashed by the bombs gave life, a new, strange, mutable life that changed and changed and changed and would go on changing until a balance was finally struck again on this world which for three hours reeled in space under the blows of an almost cosmic disaster. We were still shuddering beneath the aftermath of those blows. The balance was not yet.

When the hour of balance comes, mankind may no longer be the dominant race. That's why we keep such a close watch on all the Rings. From time to time we work them over with flame-throwers. Only atomic power, of course, would quiet that seething life permanently—which is no solution. We've got Rings enough right now without resorting to more atom bombs.

It's a hydra-headed problem without an answer. All we can do is watch, wait, be ready. . . .

THE world was still dark. But the Ring itself was light, with a strange, pale luminous radiance that might mean anything. It was new. That was all we knew about it yet.

"Let's have the scanner," I said to Davidson. He handed me the mask and I pushed the head-clips past my ears and settled the monocular view-plate before my eyes, expecting to see the darkness melt into the reversed vision of the night-scanner.

It melted, all right—the part that didn't matter. I could see the negative images of trees and ruined houses standing ghostly pale against the dark. But within the Ring—nothing.

It wasn't good. It could be very bad indeed. In silence I pulled off the mask and handed it to Davidson, watched him look down. When he turned I could see his troubled frown through the monocular lens even before he lowered the scanner. He looked a little pale in the light of the instrument board.

"Well?" he asked.

"Looks as if they'd hit on something good this time," I said.

"They?"

"Who knows? Could be anything this time. You know how the life-forms shoot up into mutations without the least warning. Something's done it

again down there. Maybe something that's been quietly working away underground for a long time, just waiting for the right moment. Whatever it is they can stop the scanners and that isn't an easy thing to do."

"The first boys over reported a cave-in," Davidson said, peering futilely down. "Could you see anything?"

"Just the luminous fog. Nothing inside. Total blackout. Well, maybe daylight will show us what's up. I hope so."

It didn't. A low sea of yellow-gray fog billowed slowly in a vast circle over the entire Ring as far as we could see. Dead central core and outer circle of unnatural life had vanished together into that mist which no instrument we had could penetrate—and we've developed a lot of stuff for seeing through fog and darkness. This was solid. We couldn't crack it.

"We'll land," I told Davidson finally. "Something's going on behind that shield, something that doesn't want to be spied on. And somebody's got to investigate—fast! It might as well be us."

We wore the latest development in the way of lead-suits, flexible and easy on the body. We snapped our face-plates shut as the ground came up to meet us and the little Geiger-counter each of us carried began to tick erratically, like a sort of Morse code mechanically spelling out the death in the air we sank through.

I was measuring the ground below for a landing when Davidson grabbed my shoulder suddenly, pointing down.

"Look!" His voice came tinnily through the ear-diaphragms in my helmet. I looked.

Now this is where the story gets difficult to tell.

I know what I saw. That much was clear to me from start to finish. I saw an eye looking up through the pale mist at us. But whether it was an enormous lens far below or a normal-sized eye close to us I couldn't have said just then. My distance-sense had stopped functioning. I stared into the Eye. . . .

THE next thing I remember is sitting in the familiar lab office across the desk from Williams, hearing myself speaking.

". . . no signs of activity anywhere in the Ring. Perfectly normal—"

"There's that lake, of course," Davidson interrupted in a conscientious voice. I looked at him. He was turning his cap over and over in his hands as he sat there by the wall. His pink-cheeked face was haggard and there was something strained and dazed in the glance he turned to meet mine. I knew I looked dazed too.

It was like waking out of a dream, knowing you've dreamed, knowing you're awake now—but having the dream go on—being powerless to stop it. I wanted to jump up and slam my fist on the desk and shout that all this was phony.

I couldn't.

Something like a tremendously powerful psychic inhibition held me down. The room swam before me for a moment with my effort to break free and I met Davidson's eyes and saw the same swimming strain in them.

It wasn't hypnosis.

We don't win our posts in Bio Control until we've been through exhaustive tests and a lot of heavy training. None of us are hypnosis-prone. We can't afford to be. It's been tried.

We *can't* be hypnotized except under very special circumstances safeguarded by Bio Control itself.

No, the answer wasn't that easy. It seemed to lie in—myself. Some door had slammed in the center of my brain, to shut in vital information that must not escape—yet—under any circumstances at all.

The minute I hit on that analogy I knew I was on the right trail. I felt safer and surer of myself. Whatever had happened in that blank space just passed, my instinct was in control now. I could trust that instinct.

". . . break-through, just as the boys reported," Davidson was saying. "That

must be what started the lake pouring up. Nothing stirring there now, though. I suppose the regular sky-scanners are watching it?"

His glance crossed mine and I knew he was right. I knew he was talking to me, not Williams. Of course the lake couldn't be hidden now that it was out in plain sight. We couldn't make a worse mistake than to rouse interest in ourselves and the lake by telling obvious lies about it. . . .

WHAT lake?

Like a mirage, swimming slowly back through my mind, the single memory came. Ourselves, standing on the raw, bare rock of the deathly Ring-center, looking through a rift of mist like a broad, low window a mile long and not very high.

The lake was incredibly blue in the dawn, incredibly calm. Beyond it a wall of cliff stretched left and right beyond our vision, a wall like a great curtain of rock hanging in majestic folds, pink in the pink dawn, looming about its perfect image reflected in the mirror of the lake.

The mirage dissolved. That much I could remember—no more. There was a lake. We had stood on its rocky shore. And then—what? Reason told me we must have seen something, or heard or learned something, that made the lake a deadly danger to mankind.

I knew that feel of naked terror deep in my mind must have a cause. But all I could do now was follow my instinct. The basic human instincts, I told myself, are self preservation and preservation of the species. If I rely on that foundation I can't go wrong. . . .

But—I didn't know how long I'd been back here. I didn't know how much I'd said, or how little—what orders I'd given to my subordinates, or whether anything in my outward aspect had roused any suspicion yet.

I looked around—and this time gave a perfectly genuine start of surprise. Except for Williams and myself the office was quite empty. In this last bout with my daydreaming memory I must really have lost touch with things.

Williams was looking at me with—curiosity? Suspicion?

I rubbed my eyes, put weariness in my voice.

"I'm tired," I said. "Almost dozed off, didn't I? Well—"

The sound of the ticker behind Williams interrupted my alibi. I knew in a moment what was happening. A televised report had come into my own office which my secretary was switching to the ticker for me. That meant it was important. It also meant—as I had reason to hope an instant later—that the visor was shut off in my office and the news clicking directly here for our eyes alone.

Leaning over Williams' shoulder, I read the tape feeding through.

It read—

UNIDENTIFIED ACTIVITIES IN PROGRESS AROUND NEW RING LAKE. SUGGEST DESTROYERS WORK OVER AREA.

FITZGERALD.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. Only one thing stood clear in my mind's confusion—*this must not happen.* There was some terrible, some deadly danger to the whole fabric of civilization if Fitzgerald's message reached any other eyes than ours. I had to do something, fast.

Williams was rereading the tape. He glanced up at me across his shoulder.

"Fitz is right," he said. "Of course. Can't let anything get started down there. Better wipe it out right now, hadn't we?"

I said, "*No!*" so explosively that he froze in the act of reaching for the interoffice switch.

"Why not?" He stared at me in surprise.

I opened my mouth and closed it again hopelessly, knowing the right words wouldn't come. To me it seemed so self-evident I couldn't even explain why we

must disregard the message. It would be like trying to tell a man why he mustn't touch off an atom bomb out of sheer exuberance—the reasons were so many and so obvious I couldn't choose among them.

"You weren't there. You don't know." My voice sounded thick and unsteady even to me. "Fitz is wrong. *Let that lake alone, Williams!*"

"You ought to know." He gave me a strange look. "Still, I've got to record the report. Headquarters will make the final decision." And he reached again for the switch.

I'm not sure how far I would have gone toward stopping him. Instinct deeper than all reason seemed to explode in me in the urgent forward surge that brought me to my feet. I had to stop him—now—without delay—taking no time to delve into my mind and dredge up a reason he would accept as valid.

But the decision was taken out of our hands.

A burst of soundless white fire flashed blindingly across my eyes. It blotted out Williams, it blotted out the ticker with its innocent, deadly message. I was aware of a killing pain in the very center of my skull. . . .

II

The Other Peril

SOMEONE was shaking me.

I sat up dizzily, meeting a stare that I recognized only after what seemed infinities of slow waking. Davidson, his pink face frightened, shook me again.

"What happened? What was it? Jim, are you all right? Wake up, Jim! What was it?"

I let him help me to my feet. The room began to steady around me but it reeled sharply again when I saw what lay before the ticker, the tape looping down about him—face down on the floor, blood still crawling from the bullet hole in his back . . .

Williams never saw who got him. It must have been the same flash that blinded me. I felt my cheek for the powder burn that must have scorched it as the unseen killer fired past my face. I felt only numbness. I was numb all over, even my brain. But one thing had to be settled in a hurry.

How much time had elapsed? Had that deadly message gone out while I lay here helpless? I made it to the ticker in two unsteady strides. The tape that looped the fallen Williams still bore its dangerous message.

Whoever fired past my cheek had fired for another reason, then, than this message. Of course, for how could anyone else have known its importance? There was a bewildering mystery here but I had no time to think about it.

I tore off the tape, crumpled it into my pocket. I flipped the ticker switch and sent a reverse message out as fast as my shaking hand could operate the machine.

FITZGERALD URGENT URGENT MEET ME AT RING POST 27 AM LEAVING HEADQUARTERS NOW DO NOTHING UNTIL I ARRIVE URGENT SIGNED J. OWEN.

Davidson watched me, round-eyed, as I vised for a helicopter. He put out his hand as I turned toward the door. I forced myself to stop and think.

"Well?" I said.

He didn't speak. He only glanced at Williams' body on the floor.

"No," I said. "I didn't kill him. But I might have if that had turned out to be the only way. There's trouble at the lake." I hesitated. "You were there too, Dave. Do you know what I mean?" I wasn't quite sure what I was trying to find out. I waited for his answer.

"You're the boss," was all he said. "Still, it wasn't any mutation that did—this. It was a bullet. You've got to know who shot him, Jim."

"I don't though. I blanked out. Something . . ." My mind whirled and then steadied again with a sudden idea. I put a hand to my forehead, dizzy with

trying to remember things still closed to me.

"Maybe something like a mutation had a part in it at that," I conceded. "Maybe we're not alone in wanting to—to keep the lake quiet. I wonder—could something from the Ring have blanked me out deliberately, so I wouldn't see Williams killed?"

But there wasn't time to follow even that speculation through. I said impatiently, "The point is, Dave, one man's death doesn't mean a thing right now. The Ring . . ." I stopped unable to go on. I didn't need to.

"What do you want me to do?" Davidson asked. That was better. I knew I could depend on him, and I might need someone dependable very soon.

"Take over here," I said. "I'm going to see Fitzgerald. And listen, Dave, this is urgent. Hold any messages Fitzgerald sends. *Any!* Understand?"

"Check," he said. His eyes were still asking questions as I went out. Neither of us could answer them—yet.

THE desolation spun past below me, aftermath of the Three-Hour War, ruined buildings, ruined fields, ruined woods. Far off I could catch a pale gleam of water beyond the seething edge of the Ring.

I'd been en route long enough to make some sort of order in my mind—but I hadn't done it. Evidently more than time would be required to open the closed doors in my brain. I had been in the Ring today—I had seen something or learned something there—and whatever I learned had been of such vital and terrible import that memory of it was wiped from Davidson's mind and mine until the hour came for action.

I didn't know what hour or what action. But I knew with a deep certainty that when the time for decision came I would not falter. Along with the terror and the blackness in my mind went that one abiding knowledge upon which all my actions now were based. I could trust that instinct.

Fitzgerald's copter was waiting. I could see his lead-suited figure, tiny and far below, pacing up and down, impatiently, as I dropped toward him. My copter settled lightly earthward. And for a moment another thought crossed my mind.

Williams! A man murdered, a man I knew and had worked with. A man I liked. That should have affected me much more deeply than it did. I knew why it hadn't. Williams' death was unimportant—completely trivial in the face of the—the other peril that loomed namelessly, in all its invisible menace, like a shrouded ghost rising from the lake beyond us.

Fitzgerald was a big blond man with blue eyes and a scar puckering his forehead, souvenir of our last battle with mutated opossums in the Atlanta Ring. His transmitter-disc vibrated tinnily as I got out of the copter.

"Hello, Chief. You got my second message?"

"No. What was it?"

"More funny stuff." He gestured toward the Ring. "In the lake this time—signs of life. I can't make anything out of it."

I drew a deep breath of relief. Davidson would have stopped that message. It was up to me now to find a way to keep Fitzgerald quiet.

"Well . . ." He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, glancing at me through his face-plate as if he didn't quite expect me to believe him. "It's a funny place, that lake. I got the impression it was—well, watching me.

"I know it sounds silly but I have to tell you. It could be important, I suppose. And then when I was making a second turn over the water I saw something in the lake." He paused. "People," he added after a moment.

"What kind of people?"

"I—they weren't human."

"How do you know?"

"They weren't wearing lead suits," he said simply, glad of a chance to pin his story down with facts. "I figured they

were either not human or else insane. They heard my ship. And they went into the lake."

"Swimming?"

"They walked in. Right under the water. And they stayed there."

"What did they look like?"

"I didn't get a close look," he said evasively, his eyes troubled as they avoided mine.

I was aware of a strange, mounting excitement that swelled in my throat until I could hardly speak. I jerked my head toward the lake.

"Come on," I said.

been expunged from my brain.

We were halfway across the rocks, our Geiger-counters clicking noisy warning of the death in the air all around us, when the first of the lake people rose up before us from behind a ledge of rock.

He was a perfectly normal looking man except that he stood there in khaki trousers and shirt, sleeves rolled up, in the bath of potent destruction which was the very air of the Ring. He looked at us with a blankness impossible to describe and yet with a strangely avid interest in his eyes.

"Earthmen, beware! Beyond those hills are monsters . . ."

There lay the blue water, moving gently in the breeze. The cliffs like folded curtains rose beyond it. There was no sign of life in sight as we crossed the bare, pitted rocks. Fitzgerald eyed me askance as we clumped toward the water in our heavy lead-lined boots. I knew he expected doubt from me.

But I knew also that he had told the truth. The lost memory of danger sent its premonitory shadows through my mind and I believed, dimly, that I too had seen those aquatic people, sometime in that immediate past which had

When we were half a dozen paces away he raised his arm and, without changing expression, in a voice totally without inflection, he spoke.

"Go back," he said. "Go back. Get away from here, now!"

It was all returning to me . . . I knew why he looked so strange, why he spoke so flatly, why that interest watched us from his eyes. . . .

I DIDN'T know. The knowledge brushed the edges of my awareness and withdrew. I stumbled forward. Fitzgerald beside me excited and eager,

calling out a question to the man.

He made no answer. He took one last look at us, blank, intent, impersonal, his eyes as blue as the water in the lake. And then he dropped straight downward, without stooping, without seem-to move a muscle. He vanished behind the knee-high ledge of rock.

We reached it together, shouldering one another in our eagerness. We bent over the ledge. The man had disappeared, leaving no sign behind him. Nothing but a little hollow in the rock where he had stood, a hollow no bigger than a saucer, in which blue water swayed. We stood there half stunned, for the time it took the water to gurgle downward and vanish in the hole and surge up again twice from some action of subterranean waters.

Memory was battering at the closed doors of my mind.

I *knew* the answer. I knew it well—but the door stayed shut. The time to remember was not yet.

They were watching us from the edge of the water by the time we had come within hailing distance. One by one we saw them wade up from the blue depths and take their stand in the edge of the water, ankle deep, rivulets running from their hair and clothing—drowned men and women, watching us.

They weren't drowned, of course. They looked perfectly healthy and there was more intelligence and animation in their faces than had looked at us from the vanished man of the ledge.

These were real people. The other had not been. I thought that much must be evident even to Fitzgerald, though it was a subterranean knowledge running through my mind that told me so.

"Wait, Jim," Fitzgerald said suddenly, catching my elbow. "I—don't like 'em. Stand back." He was watching the silent people in the water.

I let him stop me. Now that I was here I wasn't certain what came next. The terrible urgency still rang its alarm in the closed room of my brain but until I could gain entry into that room I wouldn't know what was expected of me.

Fitzgerald waved to the people in the water, a beckoning gesture. They stared at us.

Then they turned and talked briefly together, glancing at us over their shoulders. Finally one of the women came up out of the lake and picked her way toward us over the lava-like rock.

She had long fair hair sleeked back from her face by the water and hanging like pale kelp across her shoulders. Her blue dress clung to her over a beautiful, supple body, water spattering from the dripping cloth and the dripping hair as she came.

I REMEMBERED that crashed airliner and its vanished people. Were these the passengers and crew? I thought they were. But what had induced them against all reason to come this far into the deadly air of the Ring? The lake? Up to that point the thing was possible, but it was sheer madness from the moment I imagined them entering the water.

The lake, then? Was there something compelling about the lake itself that had drawn them in and sent them out again like this, alive, unharmed in the radiation-filled air that made our counters clatter?

I looked out over the waters for an answer, and—

And I got my answer—or part of it.

For out there on the rippling blue surface a shadow moved. A long, coiling shadow cast not from above but from below. Deep down in the lake something was stirring.

I strained my eyes and in the sealed deeps of my mind terror and exultation moved in answer to that coiling darkness. I knew it. I reognized it. I . . . The recognition passed.

The vast shadow moved lazily, monstrously, moved and coiled and drew itself in under the cliffs

Slowly it disappeared, coil by coil, shadow by shadow.

I turned. The fair-haired woman was

standing before us, gazing into our faces with a remote, impersonal curiosity. It was as if she had never seen another human creature before and found us interesting but—disassociated. No species that might share relationship with her.

"You're from the liner?" I asked, my voice reverberating in my own ears inside the helmet. "We—we can take you back." I let the words die. They meant nothing to her. They meant no more than the clatter of our belt-counters or the patter of drops around her on the rocks.

"Jim." Fitzgerald's voice buzzed in my earphones. "Jim, we've got to take her back with us. She's out of her head. They all are—don't you see? We've got to save them."

"How?" I tried to sound practical. "We haven't got room. There's a full liner load here."

"We can take this one." He reached out and took her arm gently. She let him, her eyes turning that remote, impersonal gaze upon his face. "It's probably too late," he said, looking at her with compassion, "but we can't leave her here, can we?"

I was watching his hand on her arm and a thought came to me out of nowhere, a fact that seemed to slip through the closed doors in my mind as they opened a tiny crack. This girl was flesh and blood. A hand closed on her arm met firm resistance. But I knew that if I had touched that first man my hand would have closed over the smooth instability of water.

I looked at the girl's face where a passing breeze brushed it, and a shiver went down my back. For it was a warm breeze, drying her hair and cheek where it blew—and I saw dark, wrinkled desiccation wherever dryness touched her skin. The sleek fair hair lost its silkiness and turned brown and brittle, the satiny cheek darkened, furrowed. . . .

I knew if she left the lake she would die. But it didn't matter. I knew there was no actual danger, either way. *(Danger to what? From what? No use asking myself that yet—the door would be open in its own time.)*

I took her other arm. Between us she went docilely toward the waiting copters, saying nothing. I don't think Fitzgerald noticed what that drying breeze was doing to her until we were nearly at the edge of the Ring.

By then it was too late to take her back even if he had understood what the trouble was.

I heard Fitzgerald catch his breath, but he said nothing and neither did I.

We lifted her into his copter. I took off behind him and the visors were silent between our ships as we flew back toward Base. What could we have said to each other then?

III

Living Lake

THIRTY minutes after we hit the Base the girl was in a jury-rigged hydrating tank, wrapped in wet sheets, with a slow trickle of fresh warm water soaking them. Even her face was loosely covered, and I was glad of that. It was an old woman's face by now, drawn tight and furrowed over her skull. Only an arm was bare, shriveled flesh beneath which the tendons stood sharply etched.

The arm was bare for the needle that fed sodium pentothol into a vein, slowly, under the watchful eye of Sales, one of our best Base medics. We knew that presently, when the drug began to cloud her mind, Sale's skillful questions would start drawing out the memories of what had happened to her, reconstructing the basic scenes which had led to—this.

Or—we hoped they would.

"It looks like aphasia," Sales murmured. "No brain injury so far as we know yet, but—"

"Chief!" It was Davidson, touching my arm. We all turned in the half-darkness that was part of this narcosynthesis treatment. "Chief, the Mobile Staff's on its way down here. They vised after you left."

"What for?" I asked sharply, a nervous dread knotting my stomach.

"I don't know. They wouldn't say. You're the boss, after all."

But I wasn't the boss of Mobile Staff. They were bigger than I, the bureau of specialists that controlled the administration of all the Rings. They were the bosses. And if they came here now. . . .

I caught Davidson's eye in the gloom. Very slightly he shook his head. The secret of Williams' death was still safe, then. But not for long. And if the Staff talked to Fitzgerald about the lake. . . .

I made an enormous effort and fought down the rising panic. Information first. Then action. I had to keep that order.

Sales grunted and I looked back, forcing my attention to the business at hand.

"She must have the tolerance of an elephant," Sales said, eyeing the tube through which sodium pentothol still fed into the girl's arm. "Or else there's some chemical metamorphosis—I don't know. I've given her enough to put a dozen men to sleep. But look at her."

I didn't like to look at her. It was obvious to me that she was dying. Yet when Sales pushed the wet sheets back from her face the impersonal, disinterested attention still dwelt upon the ceiling, fully awake, uncaring, hearing nothing we said, feeling nothing we did.

Fitzgerald said, "How could she have breathed under water?"

"She couldn't." Sales scowled at him. "There's no physiological change at all. Her respiratory system's normal."

"She must have," Fitzgerald said stubbornly. "I know what we saw."

"Anything's possible in a Ring," Sales admitted, voicing an aphorism. "But I don't see how it could have worked." He looked up at me. "How important is this, Chief?"

I told him.

"Give me an hour," Sales said briefly when I had finished. "I'm going to try something else. Several other things. Maybe one of 'em will work."

"One of 'em's got to," I told him, getting up.

In that hour a lot happened. Sales found what he wanted, for one thing. For another, the Mobile Staff arrived. Williams' body was found. And as for me—it was the hour that marked the turning point in my life.

Williams' death was reported on my private visor as soon as I got back to my office. I could feel Davidson's silence like a tangible thing as he listened to the exclamations of the others.

All I could do was order the usual investigations got under way immediately. At that moment I decided not to speak of my own presence when he died. I couldn't let myself be diverted by useless questions on a subject only distantly related to my own terrible problem.

Worse than ever that deathly fear was stirring restlessly behind the closed doors of my unconscious. I knew the doors would swing open soon. Little by little they had let facts escape the barrier, and the barrier itself would be ready to fall . . . Soon, I thought, soon.

Looking back now I lose my time-sense about that eventful hour. I think we were still lost in dismayed wonder over Williams when the visor flickered and then framed the grim, creased face of Mobile Staff's chief, Lewis.

There was a hunted, nightmare quality about this piling of crisis upon crisis, I thought, as I went down to the reception hall to welcome my superiors. If only I could find five minutes of peace to try again those slowly opening doors of memory!

MOBILE STAFF wears black uniforms. If all Bio employees are carefully tested, then Mobile men are screened with such stringent care that it's a marvel how anyone ever passes their tests. All of these men in their severe black looked taut, nervous, keen with an edge almost ruthless in its steely temper.

"What about this lake development in Ring Seventy-Twelve?" was the first

thing Lewis said to me as we walked back toward my office. It couldn't have been worse, I told myself. If they had timed themselves deliberately they couldn't have chosen a worse time.

"Three of us have seen it closely," was all I answered. "You'll want to discuss it with us in detail, I suppose."

Lewis nodded crisply. We didn't speak again until we were settled in my office, Davidson and Fitzgerald ready for questions beside me. We told what—overtly—we knew. It was Lewis, of course, who spoke with decision.

"I think we'd better destroy the thing pronto."

"Frankly, sir—" this was Davidson "—frankly, I'd think that over first. The thing's isolated, whatever it is. We'd run the risk of scattering it abroad."

"I incline that way myself," I said quickly. "Isolation. Ring it off, reroute air traffic. Leave it alone and study it . . . study it?" I suspected that was wrong. A warning bell had clanged in my brain.

Lewis sat there silently, shifting his keen glance from face to face. Just as he drew his breath to speak my desk visor buzzed.

"Report ready on Williams' death, sir," an impersonal voice said.

"All right. Hold it awhile," I began. But Lewis bent forward and gave the face in the visor a narrowed glance.

"No, let's have it right now," he said. Despairingly I wondered how much he knew and how much that abnormally keen brain had guessed already of the undercurrents running swiftly beneath the surface of events here.

The face in the visor glanced at me. I shrugged. Lewis was boss as long as Mobile Staff remained here.

"Body of J. L. Williams, assistant to chief, was found in his own office forty minutes ago," the report began. "The shot was fired from . . ." The voice went off into medical and ballistic details I ceased to hear. I was turning over in my mind crazy questions about how I could prevent an immediate close study of the lake at the very best, and at the worst its destruction.

". . . revolver of this caliber possessed only by Chief Owen himself," the visor declared. I woke with a start. "Last men seen with the deceased were Robert Davidson and Chief Owen. Chief Owen subsequently suppressed a report from Ring Station 27 and ordered a copter for immediate departure. He then took off for—"

The visor buzzed suddenly and the monotoned report blanked out. It was an emergency interruption. Very briefly Dr. Sales' face flashed upon the screen.

"This is urgent, Chief," he said, looking into my eyes significantly. "Could you spare me five minutes in my lab right now?"

IT SEEMED like a heaven-sent relief. I glanced at Lewis for permission. His gaze was cold and suspicious but he nodded after a moment and I got up with a single look at Davidson's deliberately blank face and went out.

Something prompted me to pause at the door after I had closed it. I was not really surprised to hear Lewis' harsh voice.

"See that Chief Owen doesn't leave the building before I've talked to him again. That's an urgent. Give it priority."

I shrugged. Things were beyond my control now. All I could do was ride along and trust to instinct.

Although Sales had asked for only five minutes of my time, he seemed oddly reluctant to begin. I sat down across the desk from him and watched him fidget with his desk blotter. Finally he looked up and spoke abruptly.

"You know the girl died, of course."

"I expected it. When?"

"Half an hour ago. I've been doing some quick thinking since then. And a lot of quick analyses. There hasn't been time yet to check, but I think she died of psychosomatic causes, chief."

"That's hard to credit," I said. "Tell

me about it."

"She was a perfectly normal specimen by all quantitative and qualitative tests. I think suggestion killed her."

"But how?"

"You know you can hypnotize a subject, touch his arm with ice and tell him it's red-hot metal. Typical burn weals will appear. Most physical symptoms can be induced by suggestion. That girl died of dehydration and asphyxia as far as I can tell."

"We gave her moisture and oxygen."

"She didn't know it was oxygen. She didn't think she was breathing at all. So her motor reflexes were paralyzed and—she died. As for the hydrating apparatus . . ." Sales shook his head in a bewildered way. "This sounds crazy but I think our mistake there was in giving her water as a hydrating factor. Chief, how closely did you see that lake? Do you know that it's *water?*"

Again that bell seemed to ring in my head. *Water? Water? Of course it isn't water, not as we've known water up to now.*

"Until I thought of that," Sales went on, "I couldn't understand her apparent breathing under water. Now I think I'm beginning to understand. A liquid can't be breathed by human beings, but there could be—well, artificial isotopes that would do the trick. Also, something drove that girl insane.

"I THINK she was insane. You might call it a variant of schizophrenia. Or possession if you prefer. Her mind was completely blanketed by—something else." He drummed on the desk. Then, looking up sharply, he said, "I got samples of the lake's—water. From her body. It's not water.

"Maybe it once was but now it's mixed with other compounds. The stuff seems half alive. Not protoplasm but close to it. I can't evaporate or break it down with any chemical I've yet tried.

"There are traces of hemoglobin. In fact, the stuff has many of the attributes of blood. But—and this is important, Chief—I couldn't find traces of a single leukecyte. You see what that means?"

I shook my head.

"One of the primary results of exposing an organism to radio-activity is a reduction of the number of white cells, making it subject to infection. The proportion of polymorphonuclear white cells goes down relatively. That's axiomatic. But surely you see what it suggests!"

Again I shook my head. A deep uneasiness was mounting in me but I had to hear him out before I acted. I knew I'd have to act. I think I knew already what I would have to do before I left this room. But I wanted to hear the rest of his story first. I signaled him to go on.

"Another thing I observed about the —call it water," he said carefully, "was the presence of considerable boron and some lithium. Of course the whole Ring area is subject to constant radiations of all kinds, but the important ones just now are the hard electromagnetic and the nuclear radiations that produce biological reactions.

"I suppose you remember that boron and lithium both tend to concentrate the effects of a bombardment of slow neutrons, so an organism like the lake would get a very heavy dose of the radiations that have the greatest effect on it."

"The lake—an *organism?*" I echoed.

"I think it is. Up to now we've come into conflict only with evolved and mutated creatures that were recognizable as animals even before genetic changes took place. One reason might be that mutated genes divide more slowly than others and tend to lose out in the race for supremacy.

"A complete mutation like—this lake —is something nobody really expected. The odds are too heavy against it. But we've known it could happen. And I think this time we're up against something dangerous. Big and dangerous and impossible to understand."

I leaned forward. *I knew what I had*

to do. No, not quite yet. Inside my mind the closed doors were moving slowly, swinging wider and wider, while behind them pressed the crowding memories of danger which would burst the barrier at any moment now.

"Forget all that for awhile," Sales said with a sudden change of expression. "I talked to the girl before she died. I'm taking cross-bearings on my conclusion, Chief. One line I've already indicated. The second is what the girl said. They check." He looked at me thoughtfully.

"I had to blank her mind clear down to the lowest articulate levels," he said, "before I could cut back under whatever compulsion it was that killed her. She was dying as she spoke. But from what she said I've pieced a theory together." He paused. "Tell me, did you see anything at all during your experiences with the lake to make you suspect it might be—alive?"

IV

Voice of the Lake

WITH stunning suddenness, out of my memory came the vision of a great eye staring up at me through the pale fog as I maneuvered our copter above the Ring when Davidson and I first visited it.

The Eye was the lake, a vast translucent lens that had caught us like birds in a nest and drawn us down. The power of its compelling summons pouring from the lens into our brains, like sunshine into a darkened room.

"No," I said thickly. "No, I saw nothing. Go on."

"What its origin was I can't even guess," Sales said. "But originally some molecule like a gene, out of a million other molecules in that Ring area, suffered a liberation of energy when a secondary ionizing particle shot past and it changed from a gene to—something else. Something that grew and grew and grew.

"Most of the development must have taken place underground. I think the organism was complete when that cave-in occurred that exposed it to the light and to our attentions. It developed amazingly, into forms so complex we may never understand them exactly." He smiled grimly.

"If we're lucky we never will. I can tell you this much, though—it recognized its danger. Perhaps electric impulses from our own brains struck answering chords in the—the organism. And it knew it had to defend itself, fast.

"Now the lake has one fatal weakness. By that I think we can destroy it. I believe the organism is quite aware of this because of the way it chose to combat us." He paused, looking at me so strangely that I almost acted in that silent moment. But just as I was gathering my muscles to rise, he began again.

"The girl told me what happened when that air-liner came down. It must have been sheer accident, its making a forced landing at the edge of the Ring. Radioactivity blanked out their communications and of course the air itself was close to deadly. There didn't seem any hope at all for the people in the ship.

"The girl said many of them complained of feeling—well, call it *attention*—focused on them. I know now it was the lake itself, that gigantic organism, studying them, slowly working around to a decision about its next move. Then it came to a conclusion that may not yet have reached its final equation.

"The passengers saw a man stand up from behind a rock near them. The girl said he looked familiar. He shouted and waved them away. He warned them it would mean their death if they came closer. He vanished. But the passengers were still trying to get a message out and they stayed in the ship. The man appeared three times in all, each time warning them away in stronger and stronger terms.

"Finally he rose from behind a rock very near them and this time he invited

them into the Ring. They were surprised to find that when seen this close he was a mirror image of one of their crew members. The image beckoned and ordered them in. They didn't want to obey. But they went.

"That image, as you may have deduced, was a water-figure created by the lake itself, no one knows how completely. It may have been ninety percent illusion, shaped in the minds of the watchers. But you'll notice the lake had to imitate one of the crew. It didn't at that time know enough about human bodies to improvise.

"It did know a lot, though, about human minds. In fact, its power over them and its amazing selectivity make me suspect that the original gene from which the organism developed might once have been human or close to it.

"The water image was the lake's first attempt to fight off mankind. The attempt failed. In other words an imitation wouldn't do. But the real thing was close at hand for experimentation.

"What happened next no one will ever know. Logically the organism must have moved forward another step in its defense against invasion by mankind. In effect it created antibodies. It was inoculating itself with the virus of humanity in an effort to immunize itself against a later attack.

"But it had to effect a change in the humans before it could absorb them. Physically they must be changed to live under the lake and mentally they had to alter radically to stay there of their own will. It was their will the lake attacked. You saw that.

"I said before that *something* had apparently been washed from the mind of that girl we saw and some other basic drive substituted in her. I believe now I was nearer the truth than I guessed." He looked at me keenly, almost speculatively.

"If I were in a spot like that," he said, "with the problem of altering a human being's whole emotional outlook, I think I'd strike straight at the root. It would be much simpler than trying to blanket his impulses with anything like hypnotism, for instance.

"I think that for the instinct of self-preservation those people now have another drive—instinct for the preservation of the Organism. It would be so simple, and it would work so well."

THERE was a roaring in my ears. For a moment I heard nothing of what Sales said. *The flood-gates had opened and through the backflung doors all my memories were pouring.*

"But it hasn't worked perfectly," Sales was saying from far away. "Unless the lake goes a step further, we can destroy it. Perhaps it has. Perhaps it realizes that static antibodies which can't exist outside its own bloodstreams won't help much.

"Do you think, Chief, that it might have captured still other humans and worked its basic change in their minds? Could it have implanted in men *like yourself* a shift in instinct so that you know only one basic drive—*the Organism must be preserved?*"

The idea had struck him suddenly. I could see that in his face as he learned forward across the desk, half rising, his features congesting with the newness and the terrible danger of the thought.

I didn't even get up from my chair. I'd had my revolver out on my knee for the past several minutes, though he couldn't see it from where he sat.

I SHOT him at close range, through the chest.

For a moment he hung there above the desk, his hands gripping the blotter convulsively. He had one thing more to say but it was hard for him to get it out. He tried twice before he made it.

"You—it's no good," he said very thinly. "Can't—stop me now. I've sent —full report—Mobile Staff—reading it now."

Blood cut off whatever else he wanted to say. I watched impersonally as it bubbled from his lips and he collapsed

forward into the scarlet puddle forming so fast on the desk top. I saw how the blotter took it up at first but the fountain ran too fast and finally a trickle began to spill over the desk edge and patter on the floor with a sound like the dripping of lake water from that girl's garments as she crossed the rocks toward us.

The lake was blue and wonderful in the sunlight. It was the most important thing in the world. If anything happened to destroy it I knew the world would end in that terrible, crashing moment. All my mind and all my effort must be dedicated to protecting it from the danger threatening it now.

A knock at the door banished that vision. I sprang to my feet and blocked off the desk from sight.

Davidson lunged into the room, slammed the door, put his back to it. He was breathing hard.

"They're after you, Jim," he said. "They know about Williams."

I nodded. I knew too, now. I knew why my mind had gone blank when the need to silence Williams was paramount. At that time it wasn't safe for me to remember too much. It wasn't safe for me to know too much about my own actions, my own motives. Oh yes, I had killed him, all right.

"You knew all along?" I asked him. He nodded.

"You've got to do something quick, Jim," he said. "I tell you, they're coming! They know we were there together and they're almost certain you did it. Fingerprints, bullet type—think of something, Jim! I—"

There was a heavy blow on the door behind him. He wasn't expecting it. He jolted forward into the room and the door slammed back against the wall. What looked like a tide of black uniforms poured through, Lewis at the front, his granite face set, his eyes like steel on mine.

"Want to ask you some questions, Owen," he began. "We have reason to think you know more than—"

Then he saw what lay across the desk behind me. There was an instant of absolute silence in the room. Davidson had been hurled past me by the slamming open of the door and the first sound I heard was his gasp of intaken breath as he leaned over the chair from which I'd risen.

My mind was perfectly blank. I knew it was desperately imperative that I clear myself but I'd had too many shocks, one on another, all that day. My brain just wasn't working any more.

I had to say something. I took a deep breath opened my mouth, praying for the right words.

DAVIDSON'S hand closed on my arm. It was a hard, violent grasp, but very quickly, before his next move, he pressed my biceps three times, rapid, warning squeezes. Then he completed his motion and hurled me aside so hard I staggered three paces across the rug and came up facing him, stupid with surprise.

He had scooped up the revolver which I had dropped in my chair. I saw his fingers move over the butt as if for a firmer grip. But I knew what he was doing. His prints would have effaced mine when the time came to test it.

"All right, Lewis," he said quietly. "I did it. I shot them both." His glance shifted from face to face. When it crossed mine I recognized the desperate appeal in his eyes. It was up to me. I couldn't refuse this last offer of aid from him, in the service of a cause greater than any cause men ever fought for.

I knew the truth of that as I knew my own name. There could be no greater cause than the protection of the lake.

A look of wildness which I knew was deliberate suddenly convulsed his face. He lifted the revolver and fired straight at me.

Except—it wasn't straight. Davidson was a good shot. He couldn't miss at this range unless he meant to. The

bullet sang past my ear and shattered something noisy behind me. And I saw the look of deep satisfaction relax his face an instant before Lewis' bullet smashed into it, erasing his features in a crimson blur.

He had to fire the gun at someone—I think he remembered that paraffin tests would otherwise prove he hadn't fired one recently. And it might as well be at me, to clear me of suspicion. Perhaps too he knew he couldn't make his story stand under close questioning. So it was suicide, in a way, but suicide in a cause of tremendous, unquestionable rightness. That I knew in the deepest recesses of my mind. . . .

"All right, Owen. You give the word. Where would you say it's most vulnerable?" Was Lewis watching me with irony in his keen eyes as he asked it? For that question of all others was the one I could not answer Physically could not, even had I wished. I think my tongue would have turned backward in my throat and strangled me, if need be, before I could tell them the truth.

"Make another circle," I said. "I'll look it over once more."

FIVE hundred feet below us the lake lay blue and placid. Seen from this height the majestic cliffs above it were foreshortened into insignificance, but I knew that deep beneath those rocks lay the vital cavern which no bombs must touch.

There was no sign of the mindless men and women which it had used and discarded. The antitoxin premise was no longer valid. But the next step, to a bacteriophage which would seek out and devour the virus of attack—that must not fail. I well knew what my task was.

"Try the shallows over here," I said, pointing. The ship circled and Lewis presently raised his hand.

The depth-bombs floated away behind us in a long, falling drift. They were not, I knew, merely depth bombs. Sales' memorandum had worked its recorder's will too fast for me. I had silenced the doctor but I could not silence the records. I watched the falling bombs with a sickness in my heart that was near despair.

"The Organism has no white blood-cells," Sales had reported to the Staff, his dead voice speaking the words of my own destruction in the very moment I killed him. "I believe it can be eradicated if we infect it thoroughly with a culture of every microbe and bacterium we can pour into it. The chances are something will take hold.

"If it doesn't, then we'll have to try until something does. I would suggest depth bombs. What tests I have made so far indicate the so-called water of the lake is in effect a thick skin which has so far protected the Organism from the entry of ordinary infection.

"The depth charges would serve the purpose of a hypodermic needle in introducing our weapons where they may take effect. Down there under the surface *something* must lie which is the heart of the dangerous being, something we have not yet seen. But destroy it we must, before it mutates any further, into a thing nothing could cope with."

When the first bombs burst, they might have been bursting in my own brain. Only dimly I saw the blue water fountain toward us.

We circled, watching. The water poured itself over that terrible wound. Ripples ran sluggishly out around it toward shore. It seemed to me there was a flush in the water where those death-laden charges had fallen, but if there was, something working in the lake effaced it, washed out the toxins, healed and soothed the danger away.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where next, Owen?" Lewis demanded relentlessly and I knew my ordeal had only begun. Desperation was welling up in me. How long could I drag this out? Sooner or later we would work our way around to the danger-area and this helpless being below us would die in an unimaginable agony—unimaginable to all but myself.

"Try over there," I said, pointing at random, seeing my hand shake as I held it out. I shut the fingers into a fist to stop their trembling.

How long it went on I could not remember afterward. There comes a point when flesh and blood can record no further and, mercifully for me, I reached that point after a while. By then I knew what the end must be, no matter how long I posponed it. I had done what a man could but it wasn't enough. The lake and I were helpless together and I knew—it was soothing to be sure—that we would in the end die together.

ROUND after round we made above the shuddering blue water. Charge after charge dropped, splashed, vanished, fountained up again. From shore to shore the lake was racked by interlocking ripples from those dreadful wounds. Sometimes the poisons the bombs carried were washed out and dissolved, but as time went on, more and more often they started great spreading circles of infection that traced iridescence upon the water.

Yellow virulence rippled shoreword and crossed ripples running from circles of angry crimson. The color of bruises mingled with the color of blood and the shuddering lake shivered no more than I, but in me it was a hidden shuddering. It had to be hidden.

At least it wasn't I who pointed out the heart of the lake. That happened by sheer accident. It had to come sooner or later and after a long while it came.

Deep under the cliffs that shadowy blue cavern which I had never seen was riven asunder by a burst of white fire. And that which lay coiled in it was riven too, blinded and agonized by the tearing of the explosion and the quick avid onslaught of the disease it could not fight.

The first we saw was the ominous shadow suddenly uncoiling from beneath the cliff. It lashed out like a gigantic serpent, a Midgard Serpent that clasped the world in its embrace. Convulsively it unwound itself from that shadowed cavern and burst into the open in an agonized series of spasms that made the lake boil around it.

The men around me broke into a hoarse, triumphant shouting. If I could have done it I would have killed them all. But it was hopeless now. I had no longer even the will to revenge. When a man's basic instinct dies within him he ceases intrinsically to be a man at all.

The water frothed and boiled beneath us. We lost sight of whatever it was that lashed the lake in its death-frenzy. I knew but I would not look or think. I had failed and I was ready now for

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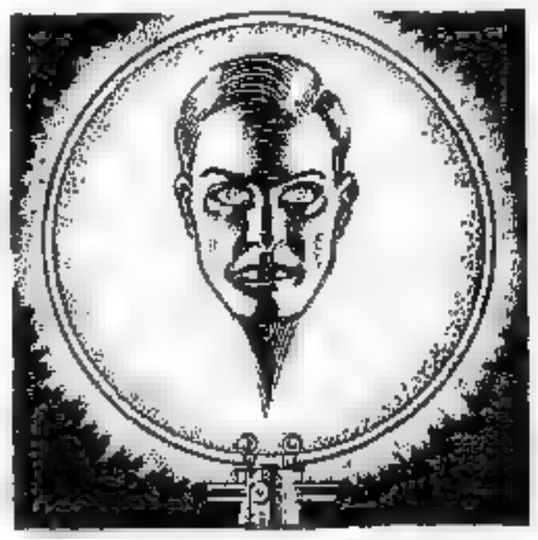

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death along with my dying master.

Very dimly I heard Lewis giving orders for the whole area to be bombed systematically to wipe out any lingering vestiges of the thing which had died here. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

I was an automaton, going through the motions of a man until I could shut them out at last and take from my locked file drawer the little revolver I kept there. In a way I envied Davidson. He at least had died for a purpose, trusting me to make his sacrifice not in vain.

I had failed him, too. I had failed myself.

I had no more reason to live.

I PUT the muzzle of the revolver against my head.

And then—and then I found I could not pull the trigger! Something stopped me, some deep command in a level of the mind below conscious recognition. For an instant of frantic hope my reason tried to tell me that it was all a mistake, that there had not, after all, been wrought upon me that change which turned me from a human to an instrument in the command of another will.

Was it self-preservation, after all, that stayed my hand? If I had that I was free.

No—it was not self-preservation. In the next instant I knew and for one immeasurable moment the hope I had so briefly cherished flickered and then went out and was swallowed up in a great surge of command.

It was not dead. *It* lay far down in subterranean waters, buried, waiting, depending upon me, commanding me to stay the hand that would destroy it with me. I must live. I must serve it.

One deep wave of sick regret swept me in those levels of the mind where human reason dwelt. *If only I had pulled the trigger an instant sooner, before that command came!*

It was too late. And now a warm, confident cunning began to well into my mind from that far-away source of command. *It* could wait. *I* could wait. I could recruit where I must and *It* would help me to make others like myself, until our ranks were strong enough.

I had not wholly failed but until I fulfilled my duty I must obey. Obedience would be a pleasure and a joy, the insidious voice promised me. Good and faithful servant, the whisper said, work for my kingdom upon Earth and your rewards will be delightful beyond imagination.

I got up and locked the revolver away again. Turning back, I caught my reflection in a mirror on the wall and paused there, staring deep into my own eyes.

I smiled. . . .

NO MORE FRICTION

(Continued from page 59)

"Then—then it was a dream—that disaster in Wall Street? I didn't kill anybody?" He let out a sigh of relief. "Whew! I dreamed that I used my demagnetizers downtown and killed a lot of people."

"Of course you didn't kill anybody," said Mrs. Blunt. "And you won't. The trouble between you and George is all over, and he's going to build you a laboratory where you can invent things all day long. He will market them and you can share the profits equally."

"And we can play bridge every night!" exclaimed Caroline.

Tompkins' eyes twinkled. "I see I shall have to invent something to make bridge games pleasant for married people," he murmured.

"You're a great inventor, darling," said his wife, as she kissed him. "But not even you are likely to do anything at all about taking the friction out of bridge!"

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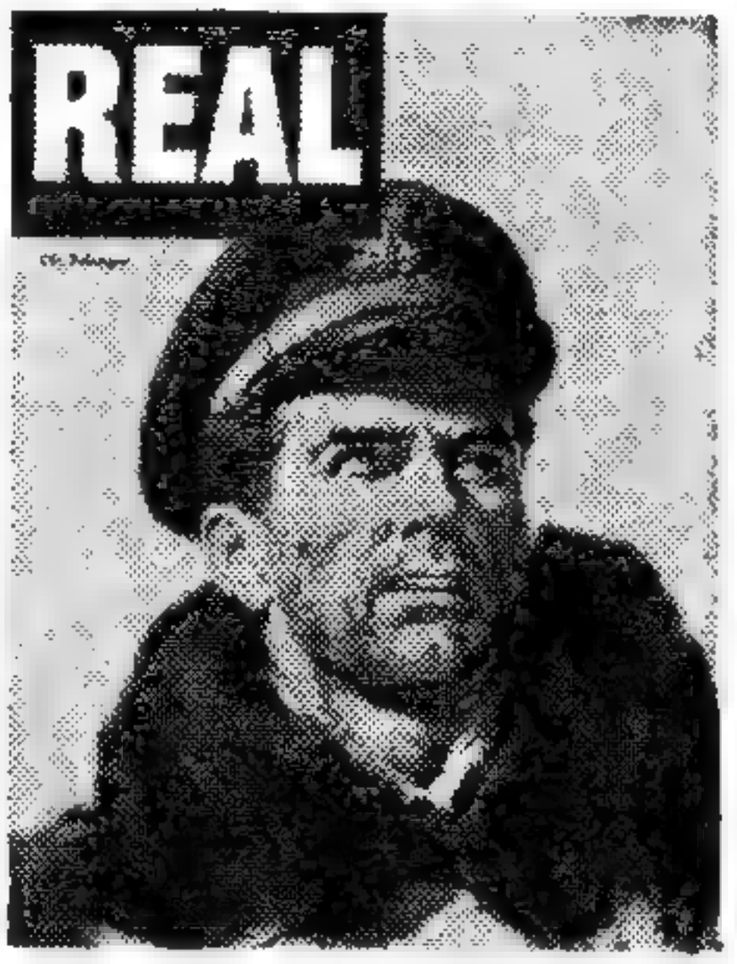

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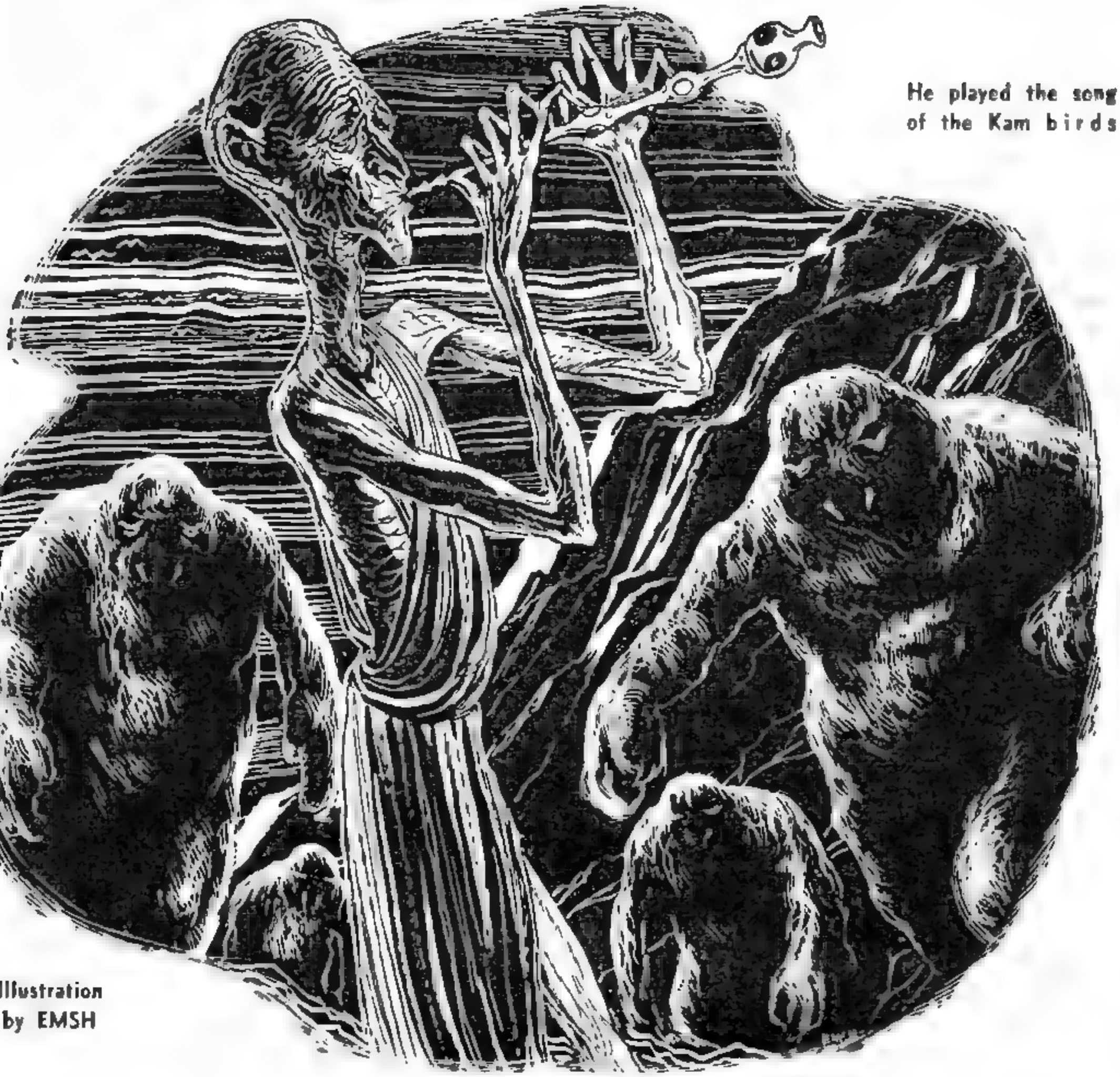

Illustration
by EMSH

THE PIPER

By RAY BRADBURY

Kerac hated the men
who had despoiled Mars.
But he had a pipe, and
a song to play . . .

FROM space, Mars was like a copper-colored lantern, burning feebly, growing old, and dying. It resembled a large blossom as the Jovian space-ship approached it.

Kerac, the Martian, stood in the heart of the ship, watching the lovely, faded flower unfold like the soft

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petals of memory—half afraid to look, not quite knowing what changes twenty years might have brought to his homeland. Mars, at first glance, was the same. Fingers of nostalgia touched him. Strange tears stung his eyes. But as the ship needled down through lean atmosphere, the physiognomy of the planet appeared scarred. Sprawling over the Martian meadowland lay a city, its pattern of black and white splotches merging into a bulging idiot eye. "Jovian riff-raff," swore Kerac as he peered downward. "What a mess!"

His thin fingers tightened, his spidery hands clutching a silver musical Pipe upon which he had composed his symphonies and folk-tunes—his only link with his past, with his fame as a composer and musician.

Kerac began to shiver as if a quiet wind were blowing through him—a wind of resentment and fear and a strange deep anger. The city's lines emerged in sharper detail. It was filthily unplanned, a proof of decay rather than progress. There was no questioning the fact that this city had been thrown together by the awkward, drunken hand of the Jovian colonizers. Squalor and the character of these pale-blue creatures from Jupiter were synonymous.

Highways shot out from the core of the city, throwing tentacles of metal southward to three other Jovian cities; each as disproportioned and irritating to the eye as the first.

Kerac raged, half to himself, half to the short, flabby, blue-skinned Jovian who stood with slitted dark eyes beside him.

"Look what they've done!" he cried. "For a million years that valley was green and fertile, soft with growing things. They've torn it up, hunting for minerals! Those mountains in the South—they were regular and beautiful. They've ripped the tops off them and shattered the sides! Is *this* your blueprint for the colonization of Mars? Is this what I must enjoy on my return from exile?"

Kerac fell silent. The blue-skinned Jovian, mute and small in comparison with the incredibly tall and thin musician said nothing.

The exile's face was a fine network of lines. A dry, brown, bird-like face it was, aquiline and keen-eyed. There was about him an indefinable air of mystery and melancholy. And now he was looking down into the faces of ten million dead Martians. They cried out to him for only one thing. They asked revenge. That was all.

"There," said Kerac, pointing. "See where the river flows down from the hills?"

The Jovian compressed his thick lips, said nothing. The exile continued.

"I was born near the mouth of that stream, up that way, where the mountains are purple. Look at it now! Marred by twenty years of smoke, grime and filth, and now turned into a sewage canal!"

"The Klondike days on Earth were as bad," snapped the Jovian, speaking for the first time in minutes. "This is the same rush on a larger scale. The end justifies the means!"

The small Jovian projectile nosed the soil, rocking to rest. Ports slid open. Seconds later, Kerac walked on Martian soil for the first time in twenty years. It was the same spongy, moist-smelling ground that his childish feet had skipped on, but now it was littered with trash, scarred and slashed by the jets of space-ships, blotched with machine oil.

Kerac stood looking a moment. Audio pillars, situated at various points about the landing field spilled music, garish Jovian songs of dissonance and chaos. Then, with an oath, Kerac kicked.

A discarded *utana* bottle went ricocheting noisily.

THEY left the rocket-port, walked into the town, into narrow, alley-like streets, filled with the thick, fishy odor of Jovian food. Laughter echoed down

crooked-spined thoroughfares. Glasses shattered. Now and then a gun snapped, propelling death, adding to the din of the alien city. The Jovian indicated a shabby dwelling.

"Sleep there."

"Thank you, no." Kerac spun on one heel, walked off toward the edge of town where the stream wound past on its way from the violet-tinged hills. "I'm going where I can breathe."

The Jovian made no move to follow, but grunted, "The Council will jail you if you do not report once a day. I will expect you tomorrow, Martian!"

"If you want me, just follow the stream—" Kerac's voice faded like a bird flying into the gathering twilight.

He walked quickly, his jaw tightened. Misery was in his soul. The harsh lights burnt his eyes. The music of Jupiter poured from towering audios all over the town, constant, grating. And, once, faintly, the sound of giggling women cut in his ears.

The sun was setting as he reached the quiet stream. He knelt there with the water lapping at his knees and prayed to the stars that some plan would help him end all this.

The stream was cold to his fingers, as cold as the blood of the Martian race which had committed suicide in order not to be engulfed and controlled by the tide of colonials swarming from Jupiter. Kerac thought of the pioneers, of his murdered family, the desecrated soil. He prayed even more fervently.

"Kam, give me strength," he asked. "Kam, give me strength."

When the city was left sprawled behind him, he walked with a new spring to his legs. Exhilaration poured through him, a song came to his lips. He lifted his silver Pipe and played his song to the hills. The hills repeated it, softly.

Stars came out, the stream at his side murmured melodies as it flowed over pebbles. Suddenly time was no obstacle. Time flew back. Twenty years fell away like a misted veil. Everything was peaceful again. There was no conquest, nothing but beauty and the night.

He turned to look at the Jovian city and its lights, a million-eyed monster defacing the plain. Other music interrupted the song on his lips. Music from the audios in the city, broadcast so loudly that the East wind plucked it, carried it to the hills.

Kerac restrained a curse, and plunged on. The mad music tagged at his heels. Was there no escaping *them?*

The wind changed. The music of Jove died into silence. He sighed with relief. It would not be long, he thought. He had come home to die. He was old. The Jovian scientists had finished dissecting him physically and psychologically, and now were sending him to his dead planet, knowing full well that alone he could not harm them. He was the last of the Golden Race.

BUT what of the creatures in the Martian mountains, the vast unnameable hordes of amorphous, guttural-voiced entities that inhabited the caves of Mars? Had they been as ruthlessly wiped out as the great Golden Race?

The Dark Race had not committed suicide, this much Kerac knew. And it would have taken time to clean them all out of the million caves. A faint spark of hope began to flicker within him.

Looking out over a dimly illuminated stretch of desert in one direction, the lifeless Martian city of Kam lay desolate. Kam's aged spires towered toward thin air, flinging out great symmetrically designed parkways and gardens like the unused pinions of a magnificent bird, forever quiescent, no more to live, no more to fly.

Not long ago that city had breathed, given birth to millions of Martians, swaddled them, raised them, given them riches, happiness from untold centuries of idyllic existence.

Kerac caressed his musical Pipe, the instrument that had given him solace during his long exile on Jupiter.

He gazed idly. A great swarm of

creatures flew up from the dead city of Kam—a trail of soaring white birds crossing stars with a shrill song in their thousand throats. Repeating and repeating their song, again and again, fading, fading and fading still more, until only a vestige of an echo wandered back in a soft finale.

Away they flew over the synthetic Jovian streets and down over the horizon from which would come the rising sun many hours later.

Then a deep grumble reached Kerac's ears. The grumble had started even as the great Kam birds flapped high with their waning song, had reached a peak as the birds subsided into the far lands. Now the grumble began to fade, but not before Kerac realized what it was.

When the birds came, singing, the grumbling followed close. But the dull grumble came from the ground, from the dim caverns of the mountains. And he knew what caused the grumble—the Dark Race! Deep in the caves they still survived. Elation flamed within him. Martians still existed, even if they were the dull-brained, misshaped Dark Race. Kerac had an ally!

KERAC had no plan as he approached the caverns of the Dark Race. He walked slowly between sheer walls that stretched five hundred feet skyward as through granite slabs of a tomb city. All was velvet silence, and only his feet beat a gentle scuff-scuff on the rock.

He stopped, touched with excitement yet a dash of fear. Something rustled just ahead. A dark shape manifested itself. Greenish eyes glared at Kerac. A low guttural snarl came through the gloom.

The shape moved sluggishly, like a ponderous, semi-human amoeba; a mass of ebon life on the verge of imitating Man. It reared up on thick black legs, groping out with fat dark arms and thick, hungry fingers. It opened a wide, lipless mouth and grunted.

Kerac fell back, fear tightening his chest like a vise. His fingers sought his silver musical Pipe. But he didn't carry it to his lips. What good was music against this terror?

He attemped an appeal to the creature.

"My friend," he appealed softly. "We are brothers. We have been blasphemed by the men from another star."

He paused, then repeated: "We are brothers."

The inhuman thing swayed. The two legs slobbered on firm rock in a horrible imitation of walking. A semblance of an arm writhed out in Kerac's direction.

"Will you help me?" pleaded Kerac. "The beasts of Jove are tearing at you. They take your riches, defile the veldt-lands. Soon they come here to wipe you out. But, before they do, help me."

The creature snarled and turned. From the caves a dozen voices shrieked reply. Kerac retreated six paces.

"We are brothers, don't you understand? We have a duty, a task to perform. Help me act now."

A roaring wall of voices rushed from the deep caves. Overhead, a cloudlet of Kam birds wafted by, singing. And with their appearance, the Dark Race gave birth to a volcano of ear-shattering cries. Hundreds of them floundered, groped, stumbled, reeled out of the stuffy tunnels.

Kerac whipped about as a thousand green eyes stared at him. His heart churned defeat and anger and hopelessness. They started to close in. He fled.

He ran until he reached a place where the walls broadened out. Here he paused. The Dark Race came no further. They had never advanced beyond this boundary. Never. Only their voices cold, pestilential, menacing, had transcended.

Even now they gave up the brief chase, returned to their caves. The night became as quiet as the distant pin-point stars. Jupiter gloated in the heaven.

Kerac, with weary feet, returned to the city of Jove, retracing his path along the glittering stream; his posture, his every step, word and thought, one of

deepest despair. . . . .

"Hoa!"

Kerac continued walking in the narrow alley.

"Hoa! You!" A Jovian, immense and long-armed, staggered out from the bright scarlet light of a *utana* den.

Kerac walked on.

"Hoa!"

The man snatched at Kerac, twisted him about and sent him sprawling to the street.

"When I speak, you listen," growled the man. He was huge, bloated and odorous with the smell of *oama*-weed and the brain-bruising *utana* liquor.

Kerac tried to gain his feet, but the man's heavy boot thrust him back. The purple face grimaced.

"You the Martian?"

Kerac nodded to save himself another jolt from the poised boot.

"I thought so." The Jovian laughed drunkenly. "Now, Martian, you will entertain. You will oblige me."

Kerac blinked at the Jovian. A crowd was gathering. The Jovian turned to the throng.

"He is the Martian, the musician you heard about."

A murmur passed through the gathering. Someone said, "So that is a Martian? By the teeth of Jobar, he is brittle."

The first Jovian went on, after swallowing a mouthful of *utana* from a hand-flask. "This musician will play for us. Take him inside."

A hand pushed him. Kerac stumbled up, protesting. A fist lashed out, swiping across his lips. Fingers gripped him tight. Hot, sweating bodies pressed him into the *utana* hut that was blazing with painfully bright scarlet lamps and thick with the haze of burning *oama* cigarettes.

The walls were painted a hideous yellow and the ceiling was low and garish with a hundred different nightmare designs—the effect on the whole producing a sense of drunkenness in a person almost immediately.

"Sit there." The Jovian leader picked Kerac up by his collar and shoved him into a low chair. "Now," he said, pointing, "play."

KERAC found himself confronted by a weird, intricate Jovian musical instrument, somewhat like an insane version of an ancient organ.

Kerac shrugged helplessly. "I can't. I don't know how."

The huge Jovian scowled. "When I, Brondar, command someone to play—"

"He is flat," someone cut in shrilly. "Give him the weed to smoke. Give him *utana* to drink."

"Ua! Ua!" the others assented thickly.

Brondar turned. "Give him dreams, Nar. I will pay."

Nar produced a flagon of *utana* quickly, offering it to Kerac, who refused it.

Nar, an abnormally short, undernourished Jovian, leered.

His blue skull-like face worked.

"You refuse?"

"I do not drink."

"You do not drink! Martian, when Nar produces *utana* he expects that person to drink." The glass was poked against Kerac's lips. "Now, drink. Else you eat the glass."

Kerac's lips became a tight, firm line. His whole body shook with resentment.

"Drink it," roared the man named Brondar.

Nar was angered. He pulled back his arm and sloshed the liquor over Kerac's face. The crowd roared approval. Nar stomped off to his *utana* cubicle, leaving the Martian to splutter and swab his face dry with his cape.

"Now," commanded Brondar, "will you play? Or will we be forced to—"

Kerac controlled himself. Quietly he reached into his cloak, brought out his pipe. "I can only play this," he said.

"What?" came the roar. "A pipe?"

"Ua! Ua!" the others drowned Brondar out. "Let him play. Let us hear."

Brondar scowled. Finally he seated himself at a table and roared, "Play."

Kerac played. He played until he was fatigued, haggard. Again and again they made him perform. And once, Brondar fired an electro-pistol at Kerac's feet, making him dance and play simultaneously.

Not before the dawn lifted in the East did he finally rest. The smoke den was practically empty. The butts of *oama* weed littered the floor. Jovians crumpled in corners, snored. Nar was draped over the *utana* cubicle's railing, and Brondar, still torpidly active, hiccuped and spat oaths at the wild-colored ceiling.

It was then that a flotilla of Kam birds winged from over the mountains, over the Jovian city and toward the rising sun. They sang their song, high, sweet, insistent. Immediately there came a faint, answering grumble.

Kerac received his first inspiration, his first clue. He listened. His Pipe clattered to the floor. Stooping to pick it up, he stopped, looked strangely at it lying there, his eyes widening. Then he looked to Brondar, who was stirring, mumbling in a husky voice.

"Whass that?" asked Brondar. "That noise?"

"The birds," murmured Nar. "The Kam birds."

"Au. Au." Brondar shook a woozey head. "I mean the other noise, the *other* noise."

"Marsquake," said Nar, feebly rousing himself. "Shifting strata in the hills."

KERAC jerked up, the Pipe in his hands, and ideas sprouting full-bloomed in his brain. These ignorant Jovians didn't even *know* the Dark Race lived in the mountains.

And Kam birds. They became part of a colossal plan that had suddenly exploded inside Kerac.

Brondar swayed, rose, his purpled face retching. "Ua. Where are *you* going, Martian?"

Brondar barred the way to the door.

In desperation Kerac seized upon an empty *utana* jug and crashed it full on Brondar's skull.

Brondar ceased barring the way.

The painted signs had not been evident at night, when Kerac had first passed this way, but they were posted every hundred yards, their black letters hot under the morning sun:

DANGER!
MARSQUAKES
SHIFTING OF STRATA

In smaller letters he read: "Any employee of Jovian Minerals discovered beyond this point will be dismissed immediately."

Kerac stood there for a long moment, the sun slashing at his tall body. The hills were not far off, baked in the oven of the early hours. The stream glittered like a million flashing knife blades. He tried to piece together the jigsaw of the signs and the ignorance in the Jovian city.

The Dark Race had survived in the mountains, untouched. The Jovian laborers called the noise that came from the mountains, "Marsquakes." There was only one possible explanation. A big job of excavating was going on in the South. The Southern mountains were already vacuumed clean of the Dark Race. These Northern ranges would be flushed soon, when the Jovians were ready to begin work here.

Until that time, the officials had decided that what the ordinary laborer didn't know wouldn't hurt him. So the Dark Race was kept secret. If the workers knew about the menace, many of them would have quit immediately. They were a superstitious lot—these Jovians.

Anyway, the Dark Race was no real menace. They didn't have the brains to organize and attack. They killed themselves. Even an intelligent man like Kerac would be unable to organize them. The Jovian Council knew this or they would never have allowed Kerac to return.

Kerac hurried on in the blistering warmth.

On the mountain top it was cooler. From where he stood he could command a view of both cities; the ancient and the modern. Off in the South came the noises of busy excavators in the Yellow Mountains.

He waited patiently until the Kam birds flew over the caverns, drawing forth a trembling Marsquake response.

WHEN the birds vanished, Kerac, with a confident smile, lifted his Pipe and played the very same notes that the birds had flung from the sky—ten notes, short, plaintive. Followed by six long sweet chords, and then lower and more insistent notes—an urgent summons. Over and over again, piping to the wind.

The mountains took up the song. But it was as weak as the last faint dawn star.

The Dark Race responded, quivering the earth. But Kerac knew they would not venture into the hated sun.

They heard his song and were stimulated by it. This much was optimistic. He would practice, listen to the Kam birds again and again, impressing their melody on his brain, making his interpretation of it more expressive, more urgent. And then, when night came . . .

At twilight Kerac stationed himself nearer the mountain base. He played the music, offered it to the slight wind that wafted down through the slate-gray walls to the holes where the creatures squatted glaring at him.

The music was heard by the creatures, coerced them. They came plodding out, their feet moist on the rocks, gesticulating ponderously, uttering cyclopean grunts.

Kerac ran to take another station. The creatures swarmed slowly out, hypnotized by the breeze-borne melody, over the narrow gullies, down the small cliffs.

"Come, my brothers," shouted Kerac wildly. "Come. Kill the Jovians." He played the hellish music. It arrowed to the stars and shook them in their orbits.

Down into the sloping foothills Kerac moved, cautiously, the inflamed horde following his music. And then a great, shattering wind came from the Jovian city, bearing with it another music. The Jovian music, the maddening symphony of sound that ravaged the air.

It devoured Kerac's pitifully weak song, punched fists of noise at the Dark Beasts and sent them whimpering, fleeing, back to the caves, back into the mountains, back into the gloom.

Kerac, struck mute, defeated, stood with the hideous Jovian music consuming the air he breathed. The music, spawned through the towering audios in the city, thrived on the East wind, flung up echoes, demanded attention. Demanded it and received it.

Kerac put his Pipe away, his lean face hieroglyphed with defeat. His last hope, his last plan destroyed by the wind from the East and the music of Jove.

He stood there a moment, with the wind fondling his cloak, tossing dust into his face.

The wind.

The wind!

KERAC turned about, exhilarated at this new breeze-inspired solution. He ran, bounding from rock to rock, fighting the wind, returning to Jove City for the last time.

Kerac hurried through narrow streets, musing over his task. It could not be accomplished with direct, drastic action. It would take a peaceful, psychological bit of handling that would throw no suspicion upon himself until it was too late.

A ponderous twenty-wheeled ore-vehicle hissed to a halt in the street. A beefy Jovian leaped down, bawling loudly: "Hoa, Martian."

It was Brondar, returning from the work in the Southern mountains. But he was smiling.

His huge blue arm shot out, picked

Kerac up by his blouse. "I have been looking for you since you ran this morning. I have need of you and your Pipe. Come."

He stalked off, dragging Kerac after him through the rambling alleyway.

"Release me," demanded Kerac angrily. "I'm a charge of the Jovian government."

"Charge?" A tremendous snorting laugh wrinkled the bruised-blue face. "Government? There is no government here. Walk." And he shoved Kerac ahead of him through the semi-gloom.

"We will make money together, Martian," he said. "After you ran this morning, the audio base official came to the *utana* den. I told him of your music. He is interested. He is looking for a man such as you. Now I have found you again, and I will demand that the audio official pay me well for discovering you and your Pipe! Turn here."

Kerac was thrust around a corner into a plaza at the center of which stood a yellowish building with the word AUDIO printed in large Jovian scrawl above the roof.

Up the steps and through a door they went. Inside, six Jovians sat about a table conferring; bottles of *utana* at every elbow, *oama* cigarettes in every cobalt-lipped mouth. Ugly faces turned toward him. He realized, by the insignia on their bulging uniforms, that these men were the highest officials in the local government. These were some of the men responsible for the destruction of Mars.

The man heading the table jumped up. "Brondar," he clipped. "You interrupt conference. What is it?"

Brondar shoved Kerac forward, waved a big paw to the assemblage and said, "He did not escape, Grannd. He will play music for you, as promised. And you will pay me well for finding him."

Grannd, the short Jovian, came quickly to Kerac, his little dark eyes flicking over the tall Martian's cloaked form.

"You are the Martian." It was a statement. "I have heard of you from Jupiter when you were exiled. There you did as you pleased. Here, where there is less law and more prejudice, you will act as we please. They say you are good. I, Grannd, will judge. Play."

Kerac looked at Grannd, knowing that here was the head of the audio base, the building from which all broadcasts emanated over the city through the audio pillars.

Now, if Kerac played his cards right, the Jovians would cooperate in their own destruction.

THE next few minutes would be crucial, the next hour would mean either the success or failure of his whole plan. He was a little frightened because his big opportunity had arrived so soon.

Kerac seated himself, pretending to be sullen, procurred his Pipe and set about producing music.

The music was so low and so sad and so sweet that the *oama* smoke ceased idling in the room and froze upon the air.

The Jovian officials, posed in various slit-eyed postures over their *oama* and *utana*, found themselves clutched in the vise of enchantment. This was musical hypnotics. Each note touched ears that ached for more. It was the melancholy song of the Kam birds, slower and sadder than ever it had been interpreted.

When Kerac finished, he played it over because the silence that followed could not be assimilated by the nerves. He played it over, a little faster. The room was quiet. Even Brondar, impressed, did not speak.

Finishing the second time, Kerac was greeted with no applause. There are wondrous things in the universe that one does not appreciate with noise, but with reverent silence. It would have been like crying "Bravo!" in the midst of a majestic church mass, or clapping hands at a glimpse of an awesome spiral nebula.

Then there was silence.

Brondar stirred uneasily, as if he had appreciated beauty for the first time in his life and was resentful because of it. Finally he swore and lighted an *oama* cigarette.

The five officials came out of their trance, murmured among themselves uneasily, smoked, lifted and emptied their flagons of liquor.

Grannd sipped his *utana*, thinking. He turned to the officials. The officials nodded. Grannd turned to Kerac.

"You will repeat that, so I can make an audio transcription of it."

Kerac repressed the smile that came to his lips. Grannd continued to talk.

"You did well. You should be flattered that I, Grannd, have said so." His speech was clipped as short as his stature. Conceit oozed from the man. He expected a "thank you" instantly.

Kerac mused, taking his time purposely. He did not wish to seem eager to cooperate.

"I don't know," he replied slowly. "I have always refused, before, to record."

Grannd's eyes crackled. "But you will. For me. Now. Immediately."

"Why?"

"Why?" Grannd puffed out blue cheeks. "I, Grannd, will transmit your music to Jupiter, present it through audio pillars all over Mars. Perhaps to Earth. You will write a symphony. It will be profitable." His voice was hard. "Come. We will make sound tests. If they are acceptable, we will sign contracts."

Grannd started for a door that led into a soundproofed room, expecting that Kerac was following. Kerac was not.

Brondar had to use force.

Kerac stood before a series of intricate acoustical instruments. Grannd cursed over a maze of machinery in the recording booth. The Jovian officials sat in a glassed cubicle, watching. Brondar, with visions of much money, stood by.

A small sound-spool was adjusted. Grannd looked up. "When I signal, you play. You are ready? Silence, then."

A pause. Then, the signal.

Kerac played as he had never played before. He played the song slowly, and then, with each time he repeated it, he went faster, higher, shriller. He played it eight times, becoming more insistent. And on the eighth rendition the music was so high it was almost inaudible. But it was grimly, terribly commanding.

"Good!" Grannd snapped off the sound-spool transcriber. "You are talented. This will bring much money."

Kerac was amused. "What is it that you find in my music that interests you so?"

"Interests?" The radioman patted his chest. "It does something to me—here."

"But will the others like it—the laborers?"

"You have seen what it does to the men who drink *utana* and smoke *oama*. If they like, everyone will like it."

"I'm skeptical. I don't believe it."

This irked Grannd tremendously. "I will prove it." He snatched up the sound-spool, transferred it to another machine, made dial adjustments and said, "We have audio pillars in every street of the city."

"Yes. I noticed them several times."

"I will transmit your music through those audios immediately, proving that you are talented by offering you to the laborers, to everyone."

"And don't forget," Brondar put in, "*I* discovered him."

Grannd snapped a button, the sound-spool turned. "If you wish," he said, "you can step outside and listen to this over the street audios."

Kerac nodded and headed for the door with Brondar behind him. In the night air, he paused, smiling. He turned to Brondar. "Shall we go to the *utana* den to listen?" he asked.

Brondar laughed, nodded.

Kerac felt the breeze, plucking at his

cloak. "Good. Good," he said, as they started walking. "There is a strong wind from the East tonight. A wind from the East."

This night the music was different when it spilled from the audios. It was the same music Kerac had played faintly in the hills, but now it was monstrously amplified. It came from Jove City, the East wind seized upon it, shoved it over the hills like a scourage of locusts and let it fall in a vast curtain of hypnotism into the dark caverns.

IN FIVE minutes the trails, the gullies, the hills and mountain-tops were alive with a creeping, ever-changing line of amoeba-like figures that swarmed down in a huge tide. The tide crossed the river, slobbered along the highway, summoned by the music. The Dark Race was not alone in the spell. Every Jovian in the city stood frozen, listening to the wondrous beauty of music.

The marsquake moved through the hills with increasing noise. The music screamed higher and higher, faster and faster, insane, sending shock after shock through the night air.

Kerac stood near the back entrance of the *utana* den, Brondar at his side. The marsquake ceased as the Dark Race approached, some psychic sense causing them to silence themselves.

The whole city was inanimate except for the sudden rushing slobber of alien feet in the alleys on the edge of town.

Kerac waited, read to escape.

Nar, the proprietor of the smoke-den, was busy filling a flacon with *utana*, listening in a trance to the music and the sound from the hills. "Marsquake," he growled.

The door to the smoke den slammed open. In the doorway loomed dark shapeless entities with green eyes. There was a period of electric unbelief. In that instant Kerac slipped out the back entrance quietly.

Nar looked up from his flagons, his blue brow furrowed. "Oa!" he cried angrily. "What is this?"

Three tables overturned. Six blue bands reached for guns. Two men fainted. Twenty flagons hit the floor, rolling in crazy circles. Brondar pulled his electro-pistol and fired.

The Dark Creatures came in to meet the bullets. Bullets do no good in black pulp. The electro-pistols had no effect. The creatures slobbered forward, unhurt. They were hungry, famished.

They took what they wanted.

Kerac, running, turned off into a side alley and waited, catching his breath. Squatting down, panting and sweating with exertion, a great calmness blessed him. The agitation was gone, the fear was gone. He felt a little drunk with power. Next he would go to the other Jovian cities, in the vast blue depths of the valleys on the other side of Mars.

Faintly, on a ripple of wind, came voices—an army of screams ripping through cool air. The screams climbed up over the city. Shots echoed. Thousands of them. Muffled footsteps pattered through the alley near him. Back against the wall Kerac realized his escape was cut off. Somehow he was not afraid. He had finished his work. There was no stopping the Dark Race now. They would carry on without him.

Stumbling Jovians ran wailing past him. They met a wave pouring down the street. They stopped a little beyond where Kerac lay, and were embraced, crushed, silenced by the Dark Things!

Kerac leaned back, took his Pipe and laid it against his lips.

Stars shone in his eyes, triumphant.

He played the song of the Kam birds.

Life in this gigantic octopus city was dying. The tentacles were withering, one by one, the giant yellow eyes were winking, fading, going out, leaving blackness. Even the music was killed by the black tidal wave.

Kerac carried on with the music until he felt the dark bodies pressing near him, the thick hungry fingers snatching at his Pipe, at his cloak, and at his throat. . . .

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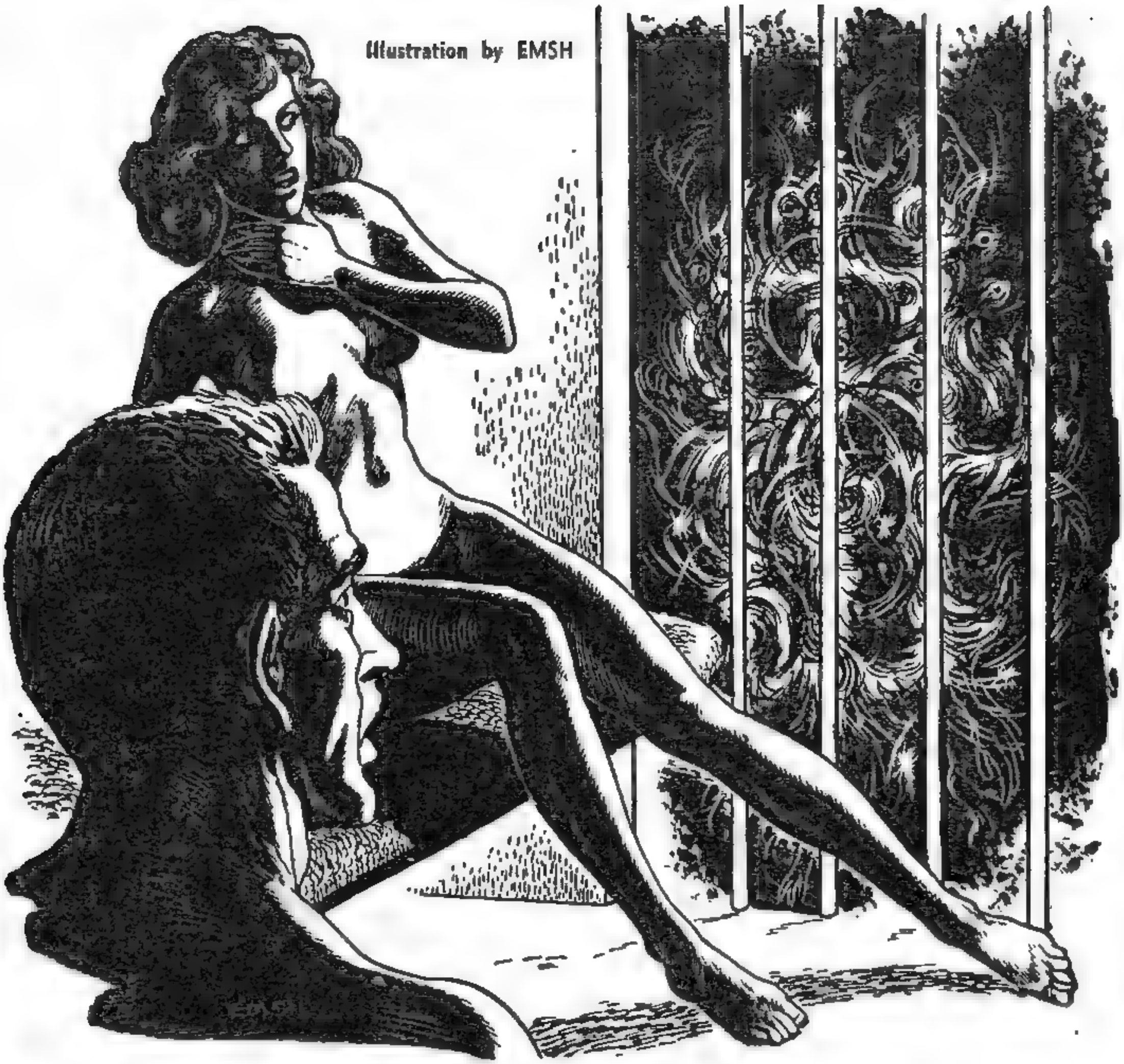

Illustration by EMSH

The Quick Thinkers

By CHARLES FOSTER

She was taller than he was—but he made her look up to him!

THE first thing that Harry O'Steiner saw when he woke up was the bars. The second thing was the two shapely long legs. His glance went past the tanned legs along the shapely body, up to the top of the blonde head. Harry O'Steiner recognized her and leered. Leda O'Knefski had always been a modest girl. He looked back over her tanned body once more.

It was only then he began to wonder where he was—where they were. He looked back at himself and was startled to see that he was completely naked, too. He looked around the room. It was small—about eight feet by four—and windowless. He turned towards the entrance. It was barred. The bars, he

could see, had a surface of soft plastic. He knew that underneath the soft, yielding skin they had cores of siempraloy. Harry recognized the little room as the detention cell in the psycho-ward. But why was he here? Why was Leda here? Where were their clothes?

He stood up and stepped to the gate, ready to shout for a medic or a guard. As he grasped the soft plastic bars and opened his mouth, however, there was a low moan behind him. He spun around. Leda, her head in her hands, was beginning to come back to consciousness. She moaned once more. She shook herself. Then she sat up.

She looked around, still only half-awake. Then she saw Harry. "Why, Harry O'Steiner," she exclaimed, "where—where are your clothes?"

"Where yours are, I guess," he said, grinning.

"Where mine are—" She looked down at herself and immediately tried to gather up the bedclothes around herself. Except there weren't any bedclothes. Just the spun-glass mattress. She fidgeted and she squirmed and she crossed her legs. She attempted to cover her taut breasts with her arms.

She didn't blush. Not that Harry O'Steiner really expected her to—nobody did any more—but he was a bookish type and had read a few of the ancient novels. What would Clarissa Harlowe have done in this situation, he wondered? Blushed first, then fainted, and finally died from embarrassment? Leda didn't show any sign of following that course, even if she did belong to the Anti-Naturalist League.

Brrrryt! Byrrrrrrtyt!

"What was that noise?" he asked.

"Why—didn't you hear it? I thought *you* said it. You said—but then, I guess it wasn't your voice after all, was it?"

"What did it say?"

"Well—but are you *sure* you didn't hear it?"

"What did it say!" Though in a way he loved the wench, he felt capable of strangling her at the moment.

"Well—it said, 'What is Clarissa Harlowe and what is the Anti-Naturalist League?' It was perfectly plain."

"Leda, are you crazy or am I? All *I* heard was a sound like—well, sort of like a machine gun, a long way away. It lasted less than a second. And you claim you heard all that!"

Brrrrrt!

LEDA cocked her head to one side. She was beginning to forget her lack of clothes. "This time, it—the voice—wants to know what a machine gun is—and, repeat, who is Clarissa Harlowe?"

"Yeah? What about the Anti-Naturalist League? They forget about that?"

"No. They say they've already got the answer to that one."

"Well, if this is a nightmare, it's sure an interesting one. Machine guns and Clarissa Harlowe." But he knew, underneath, that it wasn't a nightmare. It was real. And it wasn't insanity, either.

Brrrrryt! Brrrt! Brrr! Byyyyyyrrrt!

"Oh, Harry! Whoever, whatever it is, they want to know right away. They really do. Tell them, Harry. Now they want to know about machine guns *and* Clarissa Harlowe *and* nightmares. They say they already know what insanity is."

"I'm beginning to think I know what insanity is, too," Harry said. But he was thinking fast and clearly. He hadn't *said* anything about Clarissa Harlowe. Whatever it was—*if* it was—was telepathic. And it must have gotten some of the answers from him, and some from Leda. He decided to test the idea. He thought: "Clarissa Harlowe was the heroine of a novel written about five hundred years ago by a guy named Richardson, who wrote in a dead language called 'English.' She spent the last hundred pages dying of a broken heart, with her coffin set up beside her bed."

Brrt, byrrrt, brrt!

Leda looked up helplessly. "Now they want to know what 'coffin,' 'English,' and 'novel' mean. And they say they still

don't know what 'machine gun' means." She spread her arms in a gesture of helplessness, for the moment forgetting her chest development. "And Harry, *I* don't know either. You tell them, please. They're *very* insistent."

Harry gritted his teeth and did some more directed thinking. "A coffin is a box that we used to use to bury our dead in, before the Land Conservation Act. English was a language which was spoken before the Great Irish Uprising. Since then, everybody's spoken Gaelic. The novel is an obsolete art-form, using written words and at one time printed in books. The machine gun was a tactical weapon which for a time revolutionized strategic concepts of war and which is now used by sportsmen for shooting Venusian ducks. . . ."

Brryrrrryt!

"My, they said a whole lot that time, Harry. Now they want to know what is the meaning of—"

"Real curious, aren't they?" Harry broke in. He paused a moment, then thought: *You've got all the answers you're going to get for a while. We've got some questions too. Come on and show yourselves!*

Just as he finished thinking that, there was a slight rustle of air behind him. Harry spun around. Sure enough, there they were! Harry stared. It was obvious they weren't human. Aside from that unsatisfactory negative, though, how could you describe them? Harry stared at one of them for several seconds. The clearest way he could think of to describe the thing to himself was an image of six luminescent cats fighting violently in an alley on a foggy night. But that wasn't really right. Each of them was a single being—not a collection of different ones. Like six cats. Each one was a single entity. Each one had limbs. But whether two or six or twenty-six, he absolutely couldn't guess. He wouldn't even guess about the number of entities, out there in the corridor. At first he thought there were three. Then, five. After that, they sort of vibrated between two and five. Restless types.

Brrrrrt—byyrryt!

HARRY turned around. Leda, he saw, was staring in fascination at the shifting kaleiodoscope outside their cell, her Anti-Naturalist League modesty forgotten. She tore her glance away and looked up at him. "Harry, they say they're confused. They say that I'm—naturally—the superior one, but that you seem to have most of the information." There was a hint of both smugness and puzzlement in her voice at this.

Harry O'Steiner turned back to the wavering figures. "Why is she superior?" he thought to them. Then he turned back to Leda as the expected *Bryyyyyrt* came.

Leda looked genuinely embarrassed, and not from Anti-Naturalist sentiments. "Well—Harry—they say I'm superior because, well, because I'm a little taller than you. About five inches, they say, the way we measure height." She shrugged her shoulders, in a deprecating way, as if this wasn't really important to *her*.

Harry O'Steiner noticed Leda's little self-deprecating gesture and was grateful for it. At the same time, he felt an involuntary sting of shame and self-pity for his miserable five-feet-two. And at the same time, he felt curious about why this matter of height should be so important to their visitors. He regarded her, sitting there on the cot, her right breast cocked up a little higher than her left, her shoulders twisted slightly. Ideas and images on all levels—concupiscent, intellectual, practical-against-the-foe, philosophical—flashed simultaneously through his mind. Suddenly, he felt the blood rushing to his face, his cheeks. Like Clarissa Harlowe. Or should it properly be O'Harlowe? But this line of speculation was interrupted by the tearing, imperious

Brrrrrrrt!

Leda O'Knefski turned her yellow-green eyes to his. "They say," she said hesitantly, "that they're *very* impatient. You've kept them waiting hours. If you've got questions, they want you to ask them. And be quick. They can't spend a month, they say, just waiting for you to think."

Harry O'Steiner thought. "Why is she more important, just because she's taller?"

Again: *Brryt—brrrrrrryt!*

Which Leda translated into Gaelic as "Ah, Harry, they say that, where they live, height is a function of diet. And diet is a function of class. And that's why I'm supposed to be from a higher class than you."

"Tell them. . . ." Harry began and then broke off. He could tell them himself. He thought: In these parts, strangers, the small, compact type sometimes works out best. Acceleration, and all that stuff. So your rule doesn't always apply. As it happens, I was the superior of Miss O'Knefski in the Radiation Inspection Lab here. So I guess your functions of this and that don't really hold up for us here. His thoughts carried the dignity that only a small man could give to them.

At the end of his thought to them, their already violent activity seemed to become even more feverish. They paused then for an instant, a micron, and he almost believed he saw their true nature. Then he saw—or felt—a violet, instantaneous flash. After that, he was down, and out, and underneath.

AFTER a while he groaned. He moaned and groaned and painfully raised his head. He opened his eyes and saw he was slumped on the floor of the cell, just beside the bars of the door, just where he had fallen. He looked up and he saw that Leda was bending over him. Leda O'Knefski. "What—what happened, Leda?" he groaned. "I was standing and—well—thinking towards them, and now—now I'm here. What was it?"

She bent down further and reached under his arms to help him up, completely ignoring Anti-Naturalist principles. "I guess," she said, "they did the same to you that they did to me earlier. You know—so that you can understand what they say. I guess you can, now. It has something to do with subjective temporal velocity, whatever that means." He was on his feet now, a little unsteady, listening to her while she continued to explain. "They've left. They got a little impatient waiting for you to come out of it. They said they'd be back."

"But—Leda—what's happened? Did they say anything else? Who are they? Where are they from? What's happened to the rest of the people here on Titan?"

Leda sat back on her cot, now entirely ignoring the precepts of the Anti-Naturalist League. Her smile was indulgent, but warm and sympathetic. "One question at a time, O'Buster. From what they said while you were out, they're from outer space. I couldn't get quite where, but I did gather that they got here by teleporting themselves. They materialized off our base here on Titan and sent down some hard rays—not any we know about. The rays put everybody else on the base in suspended animation . . ."

"Everybody? Major O'Finkelstein? Captain O'Garcia? Admiral Boris O'Hashoshiro?"

"All of them," she said quietly and soberly. "All of them but us. We were in the Radiation Inspection Room, in our shielded suits, working over the space tubes. Remember?"

"Yeah. I remember. That's why we're not—suspended?"

"I guess so, Harry. We just went unconscious. They could tell, I guess, that we'd come out of it easily. So they put us in here—together—in this cell. Then, I guess, they just waited."

"But what do they want? What are they after?"

"I don't know, Harry—I really don't." She was leaning forward towards him as she said it and Harry could think of

at least one answer. Considering the gravity of the situation, he rejected it reluctantly.

"I don't know," she continued, "but at least I'm pretty sure of one thing, from the way they talked. They—they regarded the Solar System as—well—as a toy. Like a child would think of a firecracker, sort of."

"A firecracker?"

"Yes," she went on eagerly, "exactly. A firecracker. Something a child would hold in his hand with the fuse lighted, till it almost goes off. Then throw it, and bang!"

"Bang," Harry O'Steiner said, sourly and flatly. "Bang, indeed." He thought for a moment and then looked up at her. "But maybe if the firecracker went off in the kid's hand—then maybe it wouldn't be a toy any more. Then it might be more of a menace?"

"I—I suppose so," she said.

HARRY O'STEINER paused, thinking of his sad career so far in the Space Service. As a cadet he'd come out to Titan for his final training and final tests. He was the right build: short, stocky and muscular, able to withstand as a minimum the gravs of a transport rocket. So they sent him out to Titan where he waited and wondered hopefully. The waiting wasn't for long. But the decision was up to the theatre commander. No transport pilots needed, the theatre commander said. Nobody needed but scouts, and only scouts who can stand fourteen gravs in the acceleration elevator. Fourteen G's, without blacking out. Harry took the test, but he didn't quite make it. He got up right there at the limit and then didn't make it. Right up there at thirteen point five Earth G's, he blanked. Blanked out—just for three seconds—but three seconds were enough to disqualify him. Three seconds in space might mean his life, maybe a hundred or a thousand other lives. So Harry was out—washed out.

They'd washed him out, but they kept him here on Titan. First with resentment, then with resignation. Finally, with a certain grudging acceptance, he'd learned the job they'd given him in the Radiation Inspection Lab. He'd learned the job and gradually taken on a little more responsibility, going up from Tech third to second to first. He'd gone on through the months, wearing his cumbersome, lead-shielded suit, working along with his assistant, watching the siempraloy tubes as they dropped in through the hole in the dome over their heads. Testing them with Geigers, feeling them out with many other instruments for the rays picked up out in space and for the hard rays generated inside the rocket, radiating out through the tube from the atomic piles.

All the radiation had to be neutralized before the tubes were safe to send to the repair shops where they would be re-coated for use again in space.

And all this time, his five-feet two bothered him. That height was just right for a space pilot. Fine for a scout. But he was grounded. Here on Titan, he was a midget among the men of the ground crew, except for a few others who had álso been washed out. A midget among the men—and among the girls too. Almost all of them were taller than he. . . .

"Bang!" he heard. He looked up at Leda, but the noise hadn't come from her. She was sitting on her cot, lips compressed, the dull cast of thought across her pretty face. He turned around to face the barred door and the outer corridor. There they were. The visitors were back again.

They looked the same. The same confusing cat-fight-in-an-alley-on-a-dark-night look. But the sounds they made were different now. The *Brrrrrt* he'd heard before now came to his ears as understandable words. The words still came fast, but now they were not so fast that he couldn't understand them. The sentences seemed to be—to him, at least—good solid Gaelic. Solid, though

[*Turn to page 96*]

MAN FROM MARS?

This is an actual photo of a SEE Magazine photographer taking underwater pictures of shark-hunting off the coast of Mexico.

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not always idiomatic.

"Bang," he thought back.

"Bang, bang," he heard. But it didn't come from the creatures out in the corridor. It must be Leda. He turned back and saw she was pointing her finger at them like a pistol and smiling.

"Bang, bang, bang!" he heard in response from the corridor. A game, he thought. A real fascinating game. He turned back to them, a little frightened, a little enlightened.

"Well?" he asked.

"We're waiting," they said.

"Oh," he said. "Oh. Well—what do you want, and what do you want to prove? I'm tired."

There was more of the visual pyrotechnics before they answered. What did it remind him of? Six cats in an alley—a skyrocket—a Roman Candle? Harry couldn't decide. Or—were they like kittens with a ball of wool? And did he think that because, in their fantastically fast blurred motion they now seemed—well—immature?

FINALLY they began to talk. They'd agreed, he guessed, to give it to him fast. "We explore," one of them said. "We're young and exploring. It's safe, 'cause we're out of the nest now. We can teleport all by ourselves. Say we find a system and there's no danger, why we settle down and live there. It's fun, lots of fun."

Harry could understand them perfectly now, though the visual confusion was still there. He figured that they'd just 'stretched out' his audio so that he could understand them, leaving the rest of his sense impressions as they had been. They must be running on a fantastically fast time band—many times as fast as the human standard. And—in terms of their own race, whatever that was, they were children, cubs.

"What happens to the people who happen to be living in the systems you explore?" he thought.

"Oh, people. Simple. We make them pets. We like pets. We like *you*."

"Well—thanks!" Harry O'Steiner turned and looked at Leda. She was staring, fascinated, at their kaleidoscopic images, listening to their high-pitched voices. He was thinking: *Want to be a pet?*

She answered aloud, "Lord, no!"

Her decision was not entirely unexpected, though Harry did consider her expression a little less demure than usual. But then, his question had been sort of rhetorical, and if he was a little taken aback by her vehemence, he reflected that men are often startled when a woman finally makes up her mind.

With reinforced resolve, he turned back to the flickering images. "I guess it's fine to have a solar system all your own," he said, "but just as long as you'll all be safe, like your elders want. But—maybe this isn't the right one. Maybe you're likely to be burned, if you stay here."

"What's burned?" they asked.

"Well—injured—hurt," he answered.

"Oh, no, no, we don't want that!"

"You want to see—to test it out?" Harry said. "You want to see if this firecracker will go off in your hands?"

So then they wanted to know what 'firecracker' meant. Harry was glad to explain, patiently and falsely. "By firecracker," he thought to them, "we mean the gravity fluctuations which occur in our system. They're caused by the rapid mass-energy transformation that takes place at the cores of all our major planets." He was improvising rapidly and desperately hoped he was right about their telepathic abilities—that they could only receive what he consciously sent. Otherwise, this nonsense might get him into trouble.

This concept of grav-flux seemed to fascinate them. They asked an almost endless string of questions. Harry answered them as they came, plagiarizing liberally from the space-adventure telecasts he remembered.

Finally one of them—the one in the middle, he thought, though they shifted too rapidly for him to be sure—at any

rate, one of them said, "But how can we tell—how would we know if this grav-flux affects us?"

"Oh, that's simple," Harry thought to them. "Titan's too small to have this grav-flux. Even before anyone landed here that was amply demonstrated by the Spillane—Crossen formulas." He continued, drawing courage like compound interest from his own lies. "But, naturally, we have grav-flux simulators here, so that when folks go back to the big worlds they'll still be conditioned to the flux."

He was interrupted by a vagrant, wistful thought. *Couldn't we ask them about clothes, Harry?*

He turned and stared at Leda O'Knefski. For the first time he realized that he and Leda had been communicating by thought. Evidently the violet ray had given even more telepathic power to himself and Leda than the visitors themselves possessed. Or maybe the answer was that he and Leda were on one "band" and the aliens on another. . . .

But the clothes idea did have possibilities. If they could get their shielded suits back they might be some protection, in case the mood of the young visitors should change. Harry turned back to the vibrating things outside the cell door. Where you come from, he thought, height is the badge of rank and class. Here, the sign of rank is clothes. Clothes, he told them make the man—or the woman. So—well—we feel a little declassed, without the clothes we were wearing.

QUESTIONS came from all of them at once. Harry O'Steiner immediately regretted mentioning the proverb. They wanted to know what 'man,' and 'woman', meant. Harry glanced vainly over his shoulder to Leda for inspiration. She merely smiled prettily and told him to define his own way out of it. So he did. Man, he thought to them, is amply defined by a quotation from that ancient Gaelic poet, O'Burns, who said, "A man's a man, for a' that." He paused, clearing his synapses. And —uh—woman. Well, there's a definition for that, too, which goes, "A woman's only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke."

Leda grimaced.

Their interrogators didn't ask any more questions along that line. Possibly, they were confused. Instead, there was a flash of light and the five who had been there a moment before were now reduced to two, though the two that were left were still vibrating just as madly. Mere seconds passed—and then there were five again. And, in front of them, close to the plastic bars of the cell, lay the two radiation suits. There was a little glow of ultra-violet light and the suits were inside the cell.

"We can teleport things," one of them said proudly.

"Is that the way you got to Titan?" Harry asked.

"Naturally," one of them said, "how else?"

"But we don't *have* to teleport," another said. "We can carry things physically if we want, and we can walk."

An argument immediately developed among the visitors on the relative moral merits of teleportation and physical transportation. While it was raging, Leda and Harry got into their suits, their own telepathic discussion going on at the same time.

What now, Harry? What is it you're planning?

A Trip in the El, Leda.

Why?

Explode a few firecrackers.

Can you make it? (!)

Hope so—or do you want to be a pet?

No! But I want you back Harry. Please, Harry, please come back.

Harry looked with new interest at Leda. She'd attracted him before, but he'd always thought she was partial to the pilots on the base. Shortness was an asset for them—for him, a ground tech, it was just a liability. And he'd failed as a pilot. The test was simple enough, but he just didn't have what it took.

Now, though, he had to have what it took!

His thought was interrupted by raucous, high-pitched voices from the impatient tourists outside.

How long it takes you to put clothes on?

When we goin' to go?

Let's get started!

Come on come on come on come on!

Harry zipped up the last closure on the heavy, cumbersome suit and turned to face the vibrating beings in the corridor. "Okay," he thought to them, "let's go."

HARRY walked across the rock-strewn plain, toward the single tall building on Titan. The scampering figures were much too impatient to stay with him. In flashes of light, they would appear a hundred yards away—and then materialize again at his side. He strode on steadily, toward the tower that stuck its head up above the artificial atmosphere. Up and through the two-hundred-foot level of atmosphere, so that the communications center at the top could work free of atmospheric disturbance.

At last, he arrived at the entrance of the great building. Within a second, the flitting youngsters had gathered around him. He directed his thought to them: Here is the simulator for the grav-flux. Inside this building. You want to try it —or—do you figure you're up to it?

He'd touched their pride.

"Of course we're up to it!"

"Let's go!"

"We can do anything you can do—faster!"

He went on up the short broad flight of steps that led to the entrance. The same test, he thought, the same test he'd failed before. But now it wasn't a question of one man washing out of the Space Service. Now it was a question of men being men—or being household pets. He embellished the story a little as they continued. "You see, everybody here on the base has to go through this every two weeks, just so they'll be used to going back to Earth or Mars or whatever, when their time's up here."

Inside the building Harry kept walking at his steady pace but the young visitors flashed back and forth like hyperthyroid hummingbirds. He turned left at the corridor he remembered so well and stopped before the big central elevator. With the cost of transport between Earth and Titan, almost everything had a dual purpose. The elevator was no exception. It was, on one hand, just an ordinary elevator. However, it also had the extra power and equipment for use as a grav-testing unit. Here Harry had been tested, a short Earth year ago—and failed.

Outside the elevator, Harry saw the testing-unit operator. He was seated at his control panel, just as he had been seated when the hard rays struck. Harry bent over him. The man was rigid and had no discernible pulse or respiration.

"Not dead," one of the beings commented as it flashed by, "just in dead storage."

"In dead storage," Harry grunted. "How do you get him out?"

"Oh, that's simple. We just *will* him out. We'll will them all out, before we leave, if we decide we don't like it here."

"That will be real nice." Harry reached over the chest of the man in 'dead storage' and flipped the switches. He set the accelerometer to peak out at fourteen gravs in one-tenth of a second.

Okay, chums, he thought, let's go!

There were five blurs of light as they went past him into the big elevator. It was, he saw, already set up for a test. The ten removable acceleration couches were in place. They were exact duplicates of the actual couches used in one-man scouts—they had to be, because the sensation was exactly the same as acceleration under full military power in one of the fantastically over-powered scouts. Harry saw that each of the five was already in one of the couches. He made haste to get set in the couch with the master controls, because he saw the

visitors were fidgeting with impatience even more than usual. To them, minutes or hours passed in the seconds it took him to strap himself in and adjust the controls.

Quickly he unfastened the red latch on the master lever. Then he hesitated, his sweaty outstretched hand trembling. He thought of the spine-jarring jolt and the black wave of unconsciousness that would come. Then he thought of Leda and of himself—and he thought of a French poodle, neatly trimmed and combed, with a big pink ribbon tied in a bow around its neck. "Pets," he muttered, and threw the switch.

THERE was a lot of ceremony. There were speeches and then the admiral pinned on his lieutenant's insignia and a couple of medals. Then there were letters of commendation and the reading of the order straight from Dublin Supreme Headquarters putting him on pilot duty in rocket transports. At last, Harry was able to get away from the big brass for a few minutes alone with Leda. She kissed him, bending down a little to do it. He tried to communicate with her through telepathy but nothing came through. It seemed to have worn off. Probably just as well, he thought.

She didn't seem to notice the loss. "Oh, Harry," she said excitedly, "I always had faith in you. I knew you could do it." She paused and looked doubtful for a moment. "But I *still* don't understand how. What happened to them—and why didn't it happen to you, too?"

"It was nothing," Harry said modestly. "Anybody would have thought of it— even a scout pilot, maybe. Even a Belfast man, if he knew a little bit about how a grav-tester works. There's nothing new about the basic idea. Why, back in the Twentieth Century, they used the same principle on seat ejectors in jet fighter planes. The idea is that a man can stand an enormous acceleration for a very short period of time—fourteen gravs, and more." He paused, remembering how she had looked when a lot more of her was showing. "But let's not get technical. Let's talk about us."

"Now look at the birdie . . . ."

"No!" she said. "Not yet, anyway. After all, you saved me so—so I'm not a pet. And I want to understand."

"I saved you for myself," he said.

"Oh, come on, Harry, tell me. I don't mind being your pet, but first you've got to explain it all to me."

"Well—okay. Like I said, a man can stand a lot of gravs, providing it's for a very short period. Some men don't even lose consciousness. But it has to be a very short period of time. A tenth, a twentieth of a second. But our visitors, now, they lived in a different time world. Time seemed to go by much, much more slowly for them. Seconds to us would be minutes or even hours to them. I was banking that this subjective difference would be enough to knock them for a fairly serious loop when they ran up against the grav-tester. And it did."

"But weren't they used to acceleration across space, Harry?"

"No. Remember, they said they teleported. I don't think they'd ever experienced any real acceleration before in their lives." Harry paused and his mind went back to the grav-tester for a moment. "I came to, right away, but they stayed out, all five of them. They stayed out two solid hours. That must be a month or so in their time sense. I sweated blood for those two hours—if they didn't come to, how was I going to be able to revive everybody in dead storage on the base—" He broke off and looked at her impatiently. "But, Leda, you know all the rest of it. You know they finally did come to and they willed everybody back awake and then they left . . ."

She glanced down at him and said, a little hesitantly, "Harry . . . I'm proud of you and I'm glad you're a pilot now. But—uh—couldn't you get some elevator shoes?"

Harry, still with an aching back from his recent ride, said, "If there's going to be peace in this family, Leda, don't you ever mention elevator to me again."

TEN thousand light years away, the five returned tourists were the center of attention of at least fifty of their chums. All five were attempting to think at once but finally one—the tallest—shouted the others down.

Brrrrryrrryt! he thought.

Translated freely into Gaelic, what he said went about like this: "It was real super. The animals there are called humans, and they'll make wonderful pets. They're a little slow, but nice. Real friendly. And they've got a new game called grav-flux. For kicks, you can't beat it. Nothing like it in the universe!"

THE RABBIT MENACE

LAST year a number of articles about myxomatosis, a virus disease fatal to rabbits, appeared in print—with the prediction that this disease might wipe out the rabbit population of the world. An epidemic of myxomatosis seems to be spreading throughout Europe.

It was argued that when the disease, which often destroys as much as 96% of the rabbit population, reaches Asia, it may well affect the economy of some of the poorer regions. Rabbits are an important food item to many peoples.

However, it's probably too early to count the rabbit out. In Australia 24 rabbits were turned loose in 1859, and today the continent is plagued by 2,000,000,000 rabbits—in spite of the measures used against them over the years. Poisoning, gassing, trapping, hunting, digging, and many other methods were used against the rabbits, without noticeable effect.

Myxomatosis has been deliberately spread in certain areas, but the Australians still don't feel they've dealt with the rabbit menace, which causes millions of dollars in damages every year. Even if they manage to destroy 96% of the rabbits in Australia—which isn't likely—they're still left with 80,000,000 rabbits, all of an unusually hardy strain.

—Herb Baden

Illustration by
PAUL ORBAN

The Blue Primroses

By Charles A. Stearns

HE WAS the bitterest old man that I had ever met, this Gregory Mansfield. We get a lot of depressives and indifferent cynics here, of course, but not like that. Not with such a ruthless hatred for life itself.

He was one hundred and five years old, but that's not an uncommon age in this century.

We keep them going as long as they will permit, or can afford. We are not a hospital, nor a rest home for the aged and indigent, but a new kind of establishment never heard of before the

Could the heart machine beat a man at his own game?

present decade.

We keep them alive.

When Mansfield came to us, he had a sclerotic plug, or occlusion the size of the tip of your little finger in the right coronary artery. Part of the heart had atrophied. There was biliary cirrhosis of the liver and spleen in the deadly primary form, and a well-developed duodenal ulcer thrown in for good measure. I can't say how he had stayed alive until we got him, but another three months would have finished him.

The catch was that that was exactly what he wanted. I gathered that he had been a painter of the primitive school until he'd laid down his brush and palette a couple of weeks ago and decided to die. A primitive, as everybody knows, is a painting that is supposed to resemble the flat, brilliant daubings of a kindergarten mind, and no artist who is under a hundred can get by with it.

However, it was nothing to me. His granddaughter, Claire Mansfield, the last of the clan, was footing the bill, and we take orders from money here.

Claire was one of these hard-boiled moderns. They call themselves that because they don't believe in anything in which anyone else believes. They would sooner be caught on Sixth Avenue at midday without an uplift.

Naturally I couldn't understand her solicitude for the old man, and I said so. A man that old has lived his life, according to the free-thinkers.

"My grandfather is an *artist,*" she said, as though that explained everything.

"So what?" I said. "The world is full of them. The old ones have to die off to let the young ones have a chance."

That got under her skin a little, and I could see that in an unguarded moment she might have been a very pretty girl, especially if she were to loosen up and smile a little.

"Apparently, Doctor, you are ignorant of the meaning of art. The artist is nothing. It is only the work that counts, as it permanently translates the universe. The young know very little of life, but my grandfather happens to be over a hundred years old."

It sounded as if she had read it, word for word, from a book.

"In the first place, Miss Mansfield," I said. "I'm not a doctor. I'm only a technician, and my name is only Smith. In the second place I don't really give a damn for your motivations. If you'll sign these papers, I'll see what can be done."

THE first part of it was true. I'm a technician. Flanders is the doctor. He diagnoses, prescribes, and operates. I merely design new parts to replace the old ones.

Fifty years ago they were using complex machines to shunt the blood around the heart and lungs, temporarily, during cardiac operations, but no temporary measure will suffice when half the heart is dead and the rest dying. Complete cardectomy is required.

So we built the Heart, standing, as they say, on the shoulders of giants, and it turned out to be the fulfillment of a surgeon's wildest dreams.

The Heart was ponderous, but it was also wonderful. It had brought a lot of people back from the shadows. I don't mind admitting that I was in love with it, and it seemed a sacrilege to waste it on Mansfield.

They had brought him in by helicopter, and down through the elevator to Surgical. I went in with Flanders when he made the examination, and Mansfield was sitting up in bed, propped with pillows so that he could get his breath. He could scarcely talk above a whisper, but the first words that came from him were unprintable.

Flanders chuckled. It didn't bother him. He always said that he liked spirit. But so far as I was concerned, advanced age didn't give the right of insolence.

I didn't care for Mansfield, and if he wanted to die, then we would keep him alive, just to spite him.

They anesthetized him, and opened

the pectoral cavity with a pair of spreaders. But just before the old coot went under he tried to grab the control from the anesthetist's hand, smash it and do himself in for good. It didn't work. She was used to that sort of thing.

We hooked up the Heart, quickly and easily. Flanders lifted the natural organ out of the pericardial sac and laid it on the table. I had seen this take place many times, but it never failed to stir me. There is something about a human heart.

The Heart was silent, but I saw its thermal and pressure indicators crawl up and remain steady. Insulated tubes, or ducts, led from it to the black box of the chest regulator, which was strapped upon the patient. The tubes were a dozen yards long, so that the patient, when fully recovered, could range within a considerable radius of the Heart, while it remained stationary.

In addition, in these late models, I had added an extra convenience. A remotely controlled drive and directional device within the base of the machine allowed robotic movement on rubber casters, keeping it automatically at a distance of from twenty to thirty feet from the patient at all times. If he moved away, it followed him; if he advanced upon it, it retreated.

This came to be a very important factor in Mansfield's case, for in less than two weeks he was back on his feet.

FOR a while we kept an orderly on twenty-four hour watch in Mansfield's room to thwart suicide attempts. He was determined. Once the orderly went to sleep, and he pinched the ducts closed, but the second he passed out they sprang open again, being of a resilient material, and the Heart revived him.

When I came he was sitting quietly in the easy chair that we had provided, staring out the window, which was of thick plastic, at the primroses outside. They were trellised, beautiful, and perfect in every way, from leaf veins to soft petals. No eyes could have told them from natural flowers except that the decorator, exercising his artistic license, had made them bright blue. Still, they had the advantage of blooming all year round.

"Not bad, are they?" I said.

"They are ghoulish," he answered, without turning his head. An outrageous travesty on nature."

"Well, that's art for you," I said, "but personally, I like the unusual effect."

"That is because you have grown used to artificiality and the corruption of real life in this prison."

"You are not in a prison," I said.

"And where am I, then?" he said venomously. "To drag around that abominable machine as big as a piano for the rest of my days in order to survive. To have this monstrous leach strapped to me. If I could only get it off—!"

"But you can't," I said. "It's buckled tightly in the back where you can't reach it. We think of everything."

His eyes glinted dangerously. "A challenge," he said. "But I'll outwit you. Scientists are a stupid, mechanistic lot, wholly without vision or imagination."

I left him stewing in his inner hell; there was nothing else to do.

The third night after that he slugged the orderly with a chair, smashed the window, which, being plastic, did not furnish shards for blood-letting, fortunately, but popped out in one piece, and snared the blue primroses.

As an artist he must have guessed that their bright color was composed of anilene or other poisonous compounds, and he was right. We had to use the stomach pump.

It was touch and go for a while.

The following evening I was tired. Besides the trouble with Mansfield, an osteoplastic patient had fallen out of bed, and we'd had to re-dissolve his newly-manufactured femur and reform it.

I told myself that I wasn't too happy to see Claire Mansfield waiting out front for me. I had had enough of the Mans-

fields for one day. But she looked different. She wore the same suit, but the barrier of reserve had almost vanished. I could tell, somehow. She even looked a little beaten, and I invited her to have dinner with me.

SHE was nothing like I'd expected her to be. She ate more like a countrywoman than a sophistocate, as though she hadn't seen food in a week. Later on we walked it off and got acquainted.

We were doing fine until I asked her about her folks, and she said she had always been alone except for her grandfather, and wouldn't have it any other way.

I told her how the old man had almost made it one hundred percent last night.

That surprised a flicker of some emotion, which she concealed before I could define it. "How is he?" she said.

"Oh, he'll make it. But it'll be continual war from now on. Tomorrow we're transferring him to the Cottage."

"What is that?"

"A specially built bungalow where he'll be alone. It's a kind of self-confidence therapy which sometimes works.

"But will he be safe there?"

"Safe as anywhere. There are magazines, television, heavy chairs and lounges. All the comforts of home. But everything which might be used as a means of inflicting death is either fastened down or has been removed. It's quite a place. No sheets or drapes. No hard corners, no detachable metal strips. It will exercise his ingenuity."

She shivered. "It's terrifying. But we must keep him alive until the madness leaves him. somehow."

"It's a pain in the neck," I said, "but we'll try. Of course, you've got to understand that he has the advantage of us. and sooner or later, unless we can change his mind, he's sure to make it."

"Then you've got to make him change his mind."

Simple as that. "In the interests of art, of course," I said. "Well, I'll do what I can."

She chilled up on me. I had touched something underneath the façade that time. My big mouth.

When I left her at the door, kissing her goodnight would have been like kissing an iron lung. I didn't even try.

It was, as I had predicted, war. We transferred Mansfield to the Cottage in the morning, by adding a two-hundred foot drop-cord to the one already plugged into the outlet in his room. The Heart docilely followed him as we led him tubes dragging behind, across the pavilion to his new home.

From time to time he would stop, look back at it, curse it and shake his fist. But the Heart kept its respectful distance and said nothing.

Once installed in his new home, he seemed to think that we ought to leave him right away, but I felt that a briefing was in order first.

"Get out!" he said. "I need nothing from you."

"When I get ready, I'll leave," I said, "and not before. Now shut up and listen; there are a few things you'd better get straight."

YOU'LL get your food packaged and preheated every day. There'll be paper utensils which, if swallowed, are perfectly harmless, but in any case I don't think you'll want a stomach pump again. You'll be left strictly alone as much as you like. There are no doors between the rooms, so you can't shut a door and seal off the Heart in another room, pinching the tubes.

"The Heart itself, as you know, is completely automatic and safe. The power cable is sealed into the living room wall. and can't be disconnected. That steel tube on top of the case is the remote selector antenna which keeps the Heart with a convenient radius at all times. You can't confuse it with walls or corners. The antenna is unbreakable, so you can't snap it off, I'm happy to say."

"Why?" he snapped quickly.

"Without it the Heart would 'hone

in' on the chest regulator and you couldn't stop it. It might run you down or tear itself loose from the outlet. In the latter case you'd have to turn that little crank on the regulator, which is connected to a small auxiliary generator that should keep the circulation going until help arrived."

"Hah!"

"Don't worry," I said. "It's not likely to happen. And before I go, here's something for you to read." I handed him the book, with a grin.

He stared at it. It was on horticulture, *The Care and Norishment of Primroses.* I could see him begin to tremble with the rage that was building up inside. Maybe the tantrum wouldn't do him any good physically. He was old. But it was something we tried now and then. Anyway, I had a laugh coming. "You devil," he said. "Why? Why am I here?"

"Because your granddaughter wants it," I said.

He laughed shortly, a dismal bark. "Do you know why she wants me kept alive?"

"I don't care."

"The little chippie thinks I may get senile enough to change my will in her favor. As it stands she doesn't get a penny, and she never will. It all goes to an art museum." He cackled. "You didn't know that, did you?" He could see the expression in my eyes.

And I had thought, for a moment there, that I had him beat.

When it happened, as I remember, we were sitting in Yancey's Bar & Grill, which was three or four blocks away. I was still having her out to supper every night, and the way she ate, you'd have thought it was her only meal of the day.

It turned out later that it was, but there was something about her that was getting under my skin, and I didn't have time to wonder about it.

It seemed that she made good money—sales manager for a big wholesaler—and I wondered how it was that

[*Turn page*]

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she didn't dress better. She had worn that same suit every time that we met, in a time when business girls dressed better than debutantes.

I had been checking up, however, and I was beginning to understand a few things. We had been talking of unimportant things, and I slipped the question in, out of thin air, to keep her from having time to think up an answer.

HOW much dough has old Mansfield got?" I said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You heard me."

"Why—he's very well off. I think I told you that once before."

"Isn't a fact that he made several poor investments in stocks about five years ago which wiped him out, and you never did let his lawyers tell him?"

"You've been snooping."

"And isn't it a fact that he's no more of an artist than I am? That his so-called 'primitives' were so bad they wouldn't even let him exhibit them in the Scarsdale convention last year? That you're broke. and trying to save some money because you threw away all your old man left you when he died. In fact, that you're a small-town fraud?"

She sprang up. "So that's it! You'll get your money if it's the last thing I do!" She started off and I grabbed her arm.

"Wait a minute," I said, "I didn't mean—"

Don't let anyone tell you they can't fetch you quite a wallop with one of those soft-looking kidskin bags.

I was shaking my head, dazed, when the proprietor came over. The night nurse was calling. and I was supposed to get over there right away. Claire. who couldn't hear what he was telling me, forgot that she was supposed to be mad at me. "Is it grandfather?" she asked.

"A Mansfield is always the source of any trouble I might have," I assured her. "Your grandpa has locked himself in the Cottage."

Afterward, it was pretty easy to reconstruct what had happened. It must have taken him a week to figure out the plan and shape wedges from small composition bookends to go under the doors. The doors had no locks, of course.

We couldn't hear a sound from inside as I knelt to locate the wedges with my penknife, but according to the nurse there had been quite a crash a few minutes ago. That wasn't good.

I got the wedges out at last, and shoved open the door. The living room was a shambles. Somebody had slipped Mansfield a tin cup, the key to his plan. Without the cup, he could have done nothing, and I knew what to look for. The cup was supposed to go over the antenna in order to cancel its receptiveness.

It must have been quite a job to catch the Heart, which was conditioned against being caught. It was as big as an upright piano, as he had observed, but it was made for swift motion in lateral directions as well as otherwise.

He had finally hemmed it into a clothes closet for a second, long enough to drop the cup over its stub antenna before it pushed out the partition.

The relays must have clicked madly while it made up its mind what to do next. He had gone over and sat down with his back to the machine, determined to await the end.

He heard it whispering behind him as it gained momentum. It would have been inhuman not to take one last hurried glance at it, over his shoulder.

IT WAS bearing down on his chair. But just at the last moment he slid aside, out of its path, and the chair splintered under its weight. It kept going to the opposite wall before it stopped, clicking in bewilderment, and turned to re-locate its quarry.

He laughed at it. He had baited it, and shown it that he could out-think it even now. He would let it take him, but not until *he* was ready.

It rushed again. He sprang aside, and it crashed into a lamp stand and shat-

tered the plaster on the wall. That would have been the sound that aroused the nurse.

Again. This time it almost brushed him, and his breath was coming hard. He was using more energy than the errant Heart, laboring doubly to revive and to destroy him, was furnishing. It spun in the middle of the room and wound the power cable about itself. Then it made a new lunge, and the cable was yanked from the wall with a brilliant display of blue flame.

He felt an immediate tremor, and he remembered the generator in the chest regulator which was strapped to him. He began to crank as swiftly as he could. His vigor partially returned.

But he knew that he couldn't hold out long this way. He kept sidestepping its rushes, but when he did this he almost forgot to crank and it seemed to him that the pain was immediate and intense.

And then he stumbled over a hassock and fell.

Lying there on the floor where he had fallen, in the last moment of his life, panting for breath and watching it deliberately turn for another attack, he knew that he couldn't move again.

Above his head, on an end table, lay the book that I had given him. His arm was like lead, and he couldn't reach it the first time that he tried. The next time he got it.

The Heart moved forward, gaining speed. He took careful aim.

The book struck the tin cup and it bounced to the floor. The juggernaut stopped in its tracks.

He was still lying there, cranking with waning vigor, as we burst into the room.

He sat up and managed a snarl as I came to help him. "Get this power line repaired, you fool! Do you think I want to crank this generator all day?"

I leisurely repaired the cable, and he dropped the handle with a sigh, sucking in his breath and glaring at us

[*Turn page*]

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as though he dared us to say anything.

"Smirk, damn you!" he said.

I wasn't smirking. There was something bothering me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The Heart was sitting over there, cheerful and enigmatic, just as it should have been. Not that. Something in the back of my mind . . . oh well, forget it!

Claire said, "Oh, grandfather!" and went over and kissed him.

"He that loves his life shall lose it," I misquoted, "and vice versa. It seems that the old curmudgeon wants to live after all. What do you know about that." I suppose I sneered a little.

"Shut up," Mansfield said. "Go out and get me some paints. I want to do some painting. Sick of sitting around listening to your twaddle. You hear me, Claire?"

We left him muttering into his beard.

DO YOU know," Claire said, when we were out of earshot. "I think you half-planned this."

"Half-planned!" I yelped. "That's gratitude for you. I spent days setting it up for him."

"But it s-seems—"

"A little drastic? Well, you fight fire with fire. But he really wasn't in much danger. The Heart is no mauler. It would have stopped of its own accord the instant it touched the chest regulator. That was all that it was after. Just contact. It felt lost, you see."

"But—"

"The crank is a fake too, of course. Part of the treatment. There are built-in power packs to take care of the Heart's pumping when the current is cut off. It has to have them. Suppose the patient were paralyzed, or asleep?"

Her eyes were a little too bright.

I added quickly, "Mansfield must never know anything about this double-cross. He's got to keep thinking that he beat the machine by himself. That's the whole secret . . . Hey, are you listening?"

She was blubbering in an unsophisticated fashion. "You've been so wo-onderful to us!" she wailed, "And I haven't guh-got any money." This last word ended on a note like the wail of a banshee.

"Mind," I said sternly, putting an arm around her, "we don't take charity patients here. But this is a special case. Presented a challenge. Besides, when I learned what a colossal fraud you are, spending every cent you earn to buy up the old man's lousy pictures for the last five years on the sly, just to make him think he's a Raphael—! Stop that, you'll wrinkle my lapel."

She sniffed. "Poor grandfather. I suppose it's really quite funny, isn't it; his being chased by a machine that wasn't even plugged into the electric current, and his cranking furiously all the while."

"My God!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell anybody. But woman-like she had reminded me of the very thing that I had been trying to remember, what it was that didn't fit.

You can say I'm nuts if you like, but I built the Heart with my own hands. I know what is in its mechanical guts and what isn't. That power pack *did not* give it mobility. It was only hooked up to the pumps and the heating elements. Hardly enough power to spare for unnecessary locomotion. There was simply no way that that machine *could* have moved after the line was broken.

Not unless it had acquired something in this last hour that I had never given it.

A sense of humor, I guess you'd say.

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Have You Heard—?

SCIENCE NEWS AND NOTES

THREE-DIMENSIONAL chess and three-dimensional scrabble have now been pioneered by a few hardy enthusiasts, but a recent issue of Science News Letter mentions a new three dimensional game—tic-tac-toe. It's a plastic set with four levels, and the object is to get four straight markers in any direction, placing the markers one at a time.

●

If you're overweight, one thing you should watch out for is diabetes. A study of diabetics whose disease began when they were 40 or older showed that 85% had been previously overweight and that 60% were extremely overweight.

●

Some of the newer trends in American houses are multi-purpose rooms, combined outdoor-indoor living areas, and standardized parts that can be easily replaced. However, Japanese carpenters (who were also often architects) have been using such features for three centuries!

●

Next time you're chomping popcorn in the movies, remember this: popcorn contains more energy units than 96% of all edible foods listed by the Department of Agriculture.

●

Atomic energy for commercial use will probably become practical in Great Britain before it does here, because the British have a serious coal shortage. Their coal resources are so depleted that by 1970 they'll need enough atomic energy to produce electric power for the equivalent of 20,000,000 tons of coal per year.

●

Find any moth holes in your winter clothes? It's not surprising, for research shows that in a year's time, the offspring of six moths can eat the weight of a baby grand piano.

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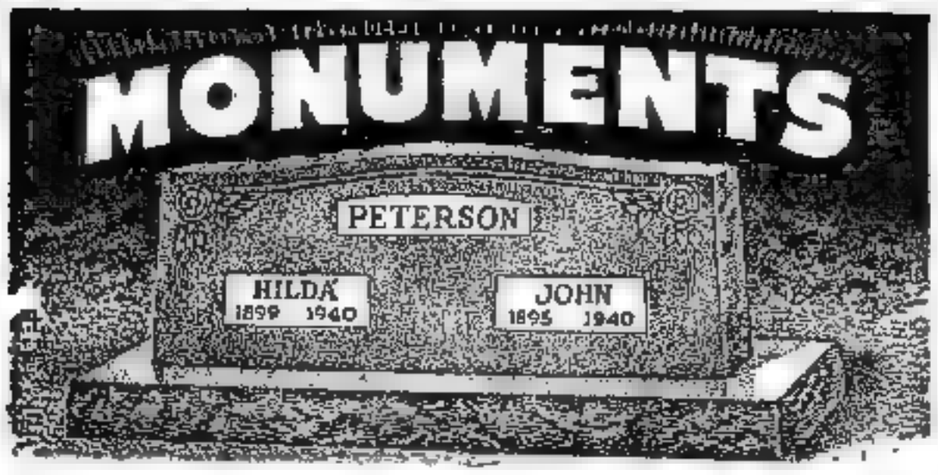

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COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 8)

here next issue!!! When the ancient one, Mines, promised more Kuttner to me several issues ago, I didn't expect so much of such wonderful fiction, Kuttner,, Kent, Vance—whoops! Anyway, it's all good.

All through *Things Pass By,* I kept thinking (no cracks, pliz) about George O. Smith. Great fella, George. Wrote some damn nice fiction, didn't he? Specially a story called *Fire In The Heavens.* (I was wondering if he'd been thinking about a hot-foot he gave E. Everett Evans, when he titled that, but we're getting off the subject.)

Anyway, the only difference 'twixt *Things* and *Fire* was the basic gimmick, you know. The writing was perfect duplication, the characters all exactly as they were in *Fire* . . . don't tell me Smith is a penname of Leinster??? As Nudnick said when he first experienced free-fall as a three month old child (I hear he kept right on falling), "Frammistab wormbattened frigatebates," which, of course, means.

I am really looking forward to Dr. Keller's story, *No More Fiction,* as promised on p. 108. —oh, that should read *Friction,* shouldn't it? Anyway, Keller's always been one of my hundred or so favorite authors. Let's have *The Revolt Of The Pedestrians,* eh?

It's been some time since you really went 'way back in your reprinting. 1945 and 1944 aren't half as old as you should be using. The first issue drew material from 1929, you know. For variety, mebbe? —*232 Santa Ana, Long Beach 3, Calif.*

Give us a chance, and we'll go back to the older ones. Meanwhile, how do you like the current offerings? No Pete Manx, but *Atomic!* should make up for his absence. However, you'll have to start writing better letters to keep readers like Jeanne Hazelett (see below) happy.

SHE DOESN'T LIKE LETTERS
by Jeanne Hazelett

Dear Editor: I am a science fiction fan. Have been ever since I could read. I enjoy your mag very much except for one thing, your letter column.

I am possessed of average intelligence and a lively imagination (else I wouldn't like science fiction) but I can't understand why you waste paper and ink on such drivel as the overly abbreviated, asinine ravings of anyone and everyone with a pen and postage stamp. If this were discontinued, at the end of the year you would have saved enough paper and ink to publish two extra mags.

When I spend my hard earned money for an evening's reading matter, it infuriates me to find two or three pages of the mag taken up with trash that even an Army code specialist would have trouble making any sense of.

Don't bother printing this as it will only bring howls of protest from the egocentrics who like to see their names in print.—*Route 1, Box 129, Brush Prairie, Wash.*

We have to disagree with you for the simple reason that most readers seem to enjoy the letter column. Besides, most of the letters show a high degree of intelligence, we feel, and we often have brisk controversies running. Also, we have sensible comments like the one on

AIR FLAPS
by Ed Davison

Dear Editor: Last Tuesday a very interesting conversation took place . . .

"HARVEY!?"

"Zzzzzmmm*glpf?*"

"New FSM's out; wake up."

"Gaip?"

"Dig the cover. Know what that big thing is?"

"Editor's head?"

"No, a space-ship."

"Nertz. It's got wings."

"Schomburg drew it; ergo, it is a space-ship. Don't argue."

"Nertz; see those fine lines on the wings?"

"Hmm. Yep. So?"

"Simple: Air-flaps; catch the air, cause resistance."

"So what?"

"You onney fin' 'em on airplanes. Hell with your space-ship."

"Well . . . it might have taken off from Earth; you'd need flaps."

"Uh-uh. Space station in a corner. Space-to-moon job. No atmo."

"But *Schomburg* drew it!"

"Nertz."

They argued on for hours, accomplishing very little. All this while I was in the other room, reading another copy of FSM, Winter. I thoroughly agree with my fellow Long-Beacher, Ron Ellik, about Pete Manx. I'm pretty new to science-fiction, but I've never found any character quite like Pete.

As a matter of fact, I disagree with Dick Clarkson, who says that Pete Manx is not as good as Gallagher. I have read most of the Gallagher stories, and I have never found anything quite so boring as that drunk old idiot romping around, inventing all sorts of stupid space-opera trash. There may be some juvenile readers who enjoy them, but I don't see at all how one could possibly compare them to the Pete Manx series. As a matter of fact, there's no possible comparison at all. How can you compare stories by a silly fantacist like Padgett to the work of a serious minded SCIENCE-fiction author like Kelvin Kent? The two men are entirely incomparable.

The other stories in the issue were fine, except for MOON OF THE WORLD. It struck me as being a hopelessly-drawn out story written purely to illustrate Walton's theories on psychoses.—*277 Pomona Avenue, Long Beach 3, Calif.*

But how do you know they were air flaps? Maybe they were merely small but detachable fuel tanks. Anyhow, Schomburg drew it, as

[*Turn page*]

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you say. He drew the one this time, too—for the Arthur K. Barnes story. No air flaps, so you won't have to wake Harvey. Let him sleep for another three months. Here's a man who . . .

LIKED THE COVER
by W. C. Brandt

Dear Editor: Finished the winter issue of *Fantastic Story Magazine*—marvelous issue!

The novel *Things Pass By* was excellent. It could readily happen. *Swing Your Lady* was amusing. *Moon of the World* was another excellent piece—and it *will* happen. *The World Thinker* was a light affair.

As usual I enjoyed Cosmic Encores. I'm taking astronomy courses, and the item about the distances of the galaxies which are doubling coincided with my studies.

The cover was good, as I love space ship scenes. The usual sex angle of a girl being chased by an alien form gets tiresome.—*Oakland, Calif.*

We agree with you that *Moon of the World* shows the kind of thing that might really happen. It was a very serious story with a good point to make—as well as good characters and action. The psychology in it (mentioned by reader Davison) was no more than the author's angle of attack, his way of seeing the characters. But now for a man who is . . .

BUYING MAGS LIKE MAD
by Walter M. Sharrock

Dear Editor: The fall issue of *Fantastic Story Magazine* bemused me by presenting two letters from Ron Ellik. It fascinates me to read the rambling nonsense batted back and forth between editor and fan and between fan and fan. I hereby announce to "Fandom" that my big toe is officially dipped in the stream, testing.

I went out and bought me a big file-card box and several hundred cards. Then I started buying up mags like mad. Now I'm well on the way toward having a beautiful, systematic record of all science-fiction stories I can lay my hands on. Is this a good start for a fan? What worries me is, where does it lead to? Do I have to join clubs, write letters to the editor, try my hand at story-writing, participate in mental-telepathy tests?

It seems to me that we need something to distinguish good science-fiction from comic-strip stuff. It hurts me to see some of the covers on the newsstand, all lumped together yet. We have horror, sex, mechanical monsters, other worlds, thought-deviants, everything. The guy who runs the newsstand doesn't have the sensitivity of a fan, so you can't blame him, I guess.

These letters coming from divers points on the globe are an interesting facet of this business. How do the magazines get to these places? At least in this type of literature these overseas friends of ours won't get distorted pictures of the American way of life as they do from so many of the tough-

guy detective stories. Many friends of mine in France believe firmly and enthusiastically that we are a country of gangsters! The movies presented them with a horribly false picture of American wealth, American crassness and so on. I'd like to see more stories in science-fiction dealing with benevolent uses of atomic energy, for instance. Even a story about the solar battery you mentioned in your editorial.

As for James McCurdy, I must rudely point out to him that his bit is tiresome by now. I volunteer to break his TV set. Please tell your fans that I'll gladly write and discuss anything with them. Evidently the true science-fiction fan *does* have an open mind on any subject.—*RFD Franklin Ave., Oakland, New Jersey.*

Will other fans in the Oakland, N. J., area get in touch with reader Sharrock? Actually, you don't have to do anything except read the magazines and enjoy the stories. Be sure to keep the magazines, or you may find that you're in the same position as the reader who

LOST BACK ISSUES
by James Sousy

Dear Editor: I would like to purchase back issues of Captain Future stories. Over the years I have lost most of the ones I had. In one of your magazines I have a list of all these stories—nineteen novels and seven novelets. If necessary I can furnish this list.—*1048 Santa Fe Drive, Denver 4, Colo.*

We can't supply back issues, but perhaps some of our readers can. Another request for magazines comes from T. Kaye, 5976 St. Margarets, Vancouver 16, B.C., Canada. He wants issues containing *The Hormone Menace* by Eando Binder; *Devils from Darkonia* by Jerry Shelton, and the sequel by the same author, *Battle of the Brains; The Voice of the Lobster* by Henry Kuttner; and *Turncoat* by Damon Knight.

Richard Albert Ertl asks that we print his new address: 797 Fray Justo Sarmiento Street, Florida—F.C.N.G.B.M., Buenos Aires, Argentina. He can take on more Pen Pals, but won't be able to swap any more magazines.

Ray Browne, 1547 Hopkins, Berkeley, Calif., liked *The Laws of Chance* and asks to see *Land of the Earthquakes* in a future issue.

Ellen Kaplan, 65-05 Central Avenue, Glendale 27, N. Y., says "So Deeck has been reading since the ripe old age of 1½. I must admit that I started as an old goat of 3½, and only began to read science fiction at the age of 10. So there you are. I'm not really a genius. My I.Q. is only 167. It used to be 187. Any comments?"

That's all for this time! —THE EDITOR.

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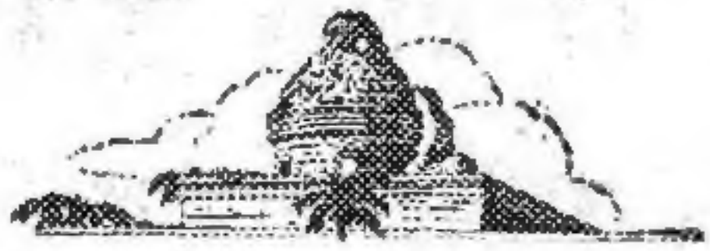

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